

(i'll tend to the flame, you can worship the) ashes

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by [darubyprincxx](#)

Summary

They get out.

After Xornoth lays the world at its knees, Gem and Fwhip take what's left of their possessions and go west on a dragon, intending to leave this world as intact as possible.

They started this journey with two, but a new person joins the party.

Or,

Pixl really, really needs a hug.

Notes

After nine months, this fic is now done! Enjoy, and may you fare well in your journey.

Starting at chapter 7, there are some heavy topics and themes. Please heed the notes/warnings at the beginning of each chapter if there are any before reading. Thank you.

If you have a question about the story itself, questions about this fic in general, or derivative pieces you want to make of the fic (i.e fanart, podfic) then you can either leave a comment here, contact us over on tumblr ([darubyprincx](#)) or consult the [site I threw together for this](#) that contains literally all of the links and bonuses and information you should need relating to this fic. Enjoy! :]

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Eulogy to a Sleeping Benevolence

Chapter Summary

All stories must start somewhere. This one happens to start with an end.

Or,

A prologue, if it can be called that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Our story begins at the end of the world.

Fail Whip, the former Count of the Grimlands, and his sister Geneveve, Empress of the former Kingdom of the Crystal Cliffs, were flying as swiftly as they could from the fresh ruin of the world they had known.

The demon Xornoth had recently come unloosed from his prison in the midst of the kingdom of Rivendell, and in a battle two months ago at the time of our tale as it stands now he had been bested in single combat by his younger brother Scott.

The ruin he wreaked upon the lands was on a scale so fantastic and so horrible that it could be scarcely recounted by the survivors, but all you need to know is this: Whatever entity that stood in for Grace had been surely killed. Blight took the crops and the forests, the rivers slowed and slowly choked with slime, the seas all dried up.

If I were at all a religious person, I would liken the event to the second coming of Christ.

But that's not relevant.

What is relevant is this: flying above the wrecked and deprecated world on the dragons they had snatched from the End, Fwhip and Gem were silent, focusing only on the days ahead and the time behind.

Fwhip had never been afraid of heights.

Clambering atop the rooftops of his hometown as a child, running the gauntlet between tall cliffs and taller tales, he'd never been taught fear. It was a skill he learned later in life, pressed between bone and marrow and a knife's edge: not the first time, and not the last. Of all of his fears, the common ones scarce applied to him: darkness daunted him not, nor the wraith that creeps unseen, nor the promise of a fall when his feet were on solid ground. They were far more abstract.

But of all of the lessons that he had learned in his time on the earth, caution had never been one of them.

Maybe that's why under the fierce and unrelenting gaze of the sun, he didn't bother to keep his exposed neck covered, nor his arms.

The name of the dragon he rode was Odysseus, a relic of an older sun wherein legends walked the earth and krakens sailed the waters and the swords of the gods shone like a second sun. He'd chosen it for the simple reason that his journey back with the egg clutched in his knapsack could be likened to a hero's journey, he'd often joked to his sister.

But Gem was silent now, as she had not often been in the past.

The middle sister in an important and flourishing family, Gem had always been competent: long braided hair swinging easily around her back, purple cloak slung so casually around her shoulders, a direct parallel to Fwhip's too-tight jacket and pants that were slightly too short in the leg and boots with the soles rubbed raw from years of running. Somehow, she always managed life as an affluent young lady with simple grace. She was a wonder bedecked in dark purple leggings and a floppy hat and inkstains, always moving, always making some sort of noise.

Fwhip, meanwhile, had always been the silent and uptight one. Go to a social gathering, he was crouched in the corner away from the light and the crowds, making jokes with a friend or two. Knock on his door, you'd be greeted with only quiet. Try to find him around the castle, he'd be long gone, an alley cat hiding from the sun.

Of course, then, it made sense that he was quite at home saddled on a dragon.

The land he flew over was dry and dusty, still reeling open-mouthed from the aftershocks of the demon days and painted gold in the glory of the slightly setting sun. To the left: a desert bleached beige by the sun, silently shifting feet every time you looked at it too hard. To the right crouched a savannah, hiding lord knows what manner of small creatures in its long and shaggy grasses. The divide between the two was gradual and imprecise, but unlike this sort of land they'd flown over before, no large game could be glimpsed.

Fwhip wondered, idly, how they'd feed the dragons once all of the food ran out.

Gem, ever the pragmatist, had packed them months' worth of ration, enough for two people. Good things, solid things. Potatoes. Lettuce, enchanted with a spell of ward against all manners of blight and rot. Some meat, given the same treatment as the vegetables. Seeds.

"It's not like there'll be any good land left anyways to plant in," Fwhip had grumbled as they were packing.

Gem had simply shrugged. "You never know," she'd said.

Now? What about now?

They'd barely spoken any words to each other since they left. Their days consisted of waking, packing their meager camp into the few bags that had survived, booting the dragons into midair, and flying for most of the day until Fwhip's thighs were sore and he ached for solid ground, easy ground to walk on. Dismount at sunset.

Now, the sun in its infinite cycle of death and rebirth, death and rebirth had painted the sky a thousand and one colors: rose gold, dandelion, ashes of roses pink, the blue of the placid and ever-shifting oceans, and eventually, as a faint and alien mountain range came into view, it faded into a solemn and peaceful midnight's black.

Fwhip signaled to Gem to land, and the two dragons circled the drifting savannah for a moment before touching down lightly back to earth.

They unloosed the dragons from their harnesses, letting the beasts shake themselves free of the

itches they had caused. Gem was humming now, a mournful tune, and Fwhip recognized it as a funeral hymn from the Crystal Cliffs.

"Who are you singing that for?" he asked.

"Everything," responded Gem simply. She gestured to the completeness of the ruin around them, the death of what was, the death of their friends. So far, nobody had responded. Nobody had shown any sign of life. They'd all gotten out, like they were, or they were lost or worse. "Haven't you seen it?"

Fwhip snorted, not looking up from where he was folding the harnesses to be packed for the night. "Who's going to hear it other than us? What gods are left?"

"I don't know," Gem said quietly. "I just think that someone has to remember them."

All was silent at that, and Fwhip nudged Odysseus, scratching their wing. "Go and hunt, now," he said. "I know you're hungry. Go on, I'll give you a scale brush when you get back."

Odysseus huffed assent and took off into the sky. Besides Fwhip, Hyacinth, Gem's dragon and Odysseus' mate, nudged her owner's hand and took off as well.

"They'll hunt this entire savannah dry of animals," said Gem, watching them go.

Fwhip knelt as he started a small fire, tossed a piece of charcoal in, watched it for a few seconds to make sure it started properly and didn't spread to the bone-dry grass around them. "It's not like there's anyone else out here to eat them," he responded.

"True," said Gem.

All of their interactions had been like this lately: clipped and curt, no room for emotions. Just survival. When you were thrown into the end of everything as one of the last surviving things in the world, you did not think about what was or what had been. You only focused on this next thing: meals, escape, running, running. Now was not the time to face your demons. Not here, in the half-light slowly fading to black, the curtains of the world being drawn thick and heavy for the end of the day.

As Fwhip unpacked his bedroll and patted it into shape, slowly the fire was the only thing illuminating the landscape around him. Stars appeared above: one two three, though he did not look up to count them and he did not quite care anyways. Over a small rise on his end of the camp, the last vestiges of sunlight could be seen fading out into dark. The dragons appeared as sounds in the night, then shapes dimly visible against the sky: a deeper black against the grey.

They landed, Odysseus immediately butting up against Fwhip for his scale brush, and Fwhip muttered confirmation before getting out the wire brush and carefully going over each scale.

Now usually, in the wilderness, there are noises in the night: the chirping of crickets, the hiss of snakes, the chitters and hoots of the owls hidden in the trees and the ground-birds in their burrows. But this night was silent. This night held no noise except for the lonely whisper of wind in the grass, speaking in some arcane tongue no human could really understand and the occasional mourning cry of a bird in the distance.

It had been this way every evening for a week.

The near-silence was sacred, almost, deathly. It almost felt like a thing not to be disturbed, and Fwhip took careful care to not disturb it as the brush scraped over the last of Odysseus' scales: a

soothing rasp, a familiar one.

Near the rise that Fwhip had long ago decided was a dune, sand whispered gently. It pooled.

Behind the dune, a twig snapped.

Chapter End Notes

okay so yes i completely overhauled this chapter like thirty minutes after posting it but that is because i wrote this with the entirely wrong vibes and had to fix it because if i wanted to continue it id lose motivation. Anyways we're good now full steam ahead!

A Deathly Silence

Chapter Summary

Pixl has shown up again, after years, but something is wrong.

It takes Fwhip a while to figure out exactly what that "wrong" is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Hello?" called out Gem. "Who's there?"

No response.

"Show yourself," commanded Fwhip, and he hated how his voice wavered, hated how hard his hand gripped the hilt of his sparsely-used sword.

"Who would be all the way out here?" whispered Gem. "They might be hungry. We have food."

"Gem, no," hissed back Fwhip. "We only packed enough for two people. We are *not* letting on some random guy just because-"

"Well, whatever you say, I'm going to go talk to whoever it is," whispered back Gem. She stood to her full height, dimly visible against the millions and millions of stars in the background. "We will not hurt you," she called to the night. "My name is Gynaveve, and I am here with my brother Fwhip. We will not hurt you, nor will our dragons."

A whisper of movement from behind the dune. Odysseus the dragon rose slowly, on guard, though moving in a strange way that Fwhip couldn't quite place the reasoning behind. Maybe it was the half-light obscuring the shadows in his vision, but the dragon seemed to move less aggressively than they would have if there was a threat. Was that growl in their throat a warning, or a greeting?

Fwhip stood up and walked to the right of where Gem was, sword still at the ready. From behind the dune, out stepped what Fwhip fully believed was a desert husk for the better half of fifteen seconds.

It was tall, and ragged, and moved with an odd gait that hinted at an injury, or perhaps a habit of walking irregularly to hide the normal rhythm of footsteps. It wore some sort of long jacket, torn and matted at the edges, and in that long, silent half-shadow Fwhip could not see its face but caught the glint of eyes, dull and yet somehow tiredly wary.

The oddest thing about this creature, though, was that it was silent. There were no ragged half-breaths that were customary to zombies and husks, nor grunts or moans as it took in its prey: just an odd, mournful, strangely familiar creature that Fwhip realized with a shock was human, or must have at least been human at one point.

"Oh," breathed Gem, walking forwards slowly. The half-creature stepped back once, but did not carry the stance of a being poised either to attack or to flee.

"What is...?" asked Fwhip, not sure how to finish that sentence. He cleared his throat. "Can you understand us?" he said loudly to the being.

No response.

Gem was still standing there, looking, close to walking up to them. Long hair flowing there. Odysseus the dragon still on guard, Fwhip's hand still on his sword.

"Gem, come on," he said, not loosening his grip on the hilt of his blade. "It's just standing there. I don't think it speaks our language. Might just be a docile husk. Anyways, it'll wander off eventually. Come on."

Gem did not move. Fwhip walked up to her to tug on her sleeve. "Come on," he said again, more insisting this time.

There were clouds that had been shading the moon, solid and heavy. The sun had painted them a trillion colors as the evening had peaked, but now they just hung there in the sky: the color of the inks the gods must use to write their laws. Now, pushed aside by some finger of fate or perhaps simply the wind, they stepped aside to let the half-moon drop a bit more of its light on the ground below.

Besides him, Gem caught her breath. Fwhip glanced towards the being and suddenly could not stop looking.

What he had thought was a husk, a mindless monster, was a human being. One with a face. A face he recognized.

"Pixl?" he whispered.

He had been looking for this man for years, ever since his second quiet disappearance: no messages, no traces. The Pixandrian peoples were no help. They had shunned him, for good this time, and after a month of frantic searching and combing the endless desert Fwhip had resigned himself to the slow dull grief that he had become a part of the wastes, bones picked clean, slowly turning to sand.

He stepped forward, sword forgotten. "Pix, I was looking for years. *We* were looking for years. There was no trace of you anywhere, no-" He paused, took a breath, voice cracking on the last word. "I thought you were *dead*."

Somewhere in the distance, the bird sang again. It was still quiet, too quiet. Fwhip was still just standing there, waiting for Pixl to say something, anything, move, make any noise. Give one of those quiet sideways smiles like he was so given to, walk up and clap his friend on the back and sit down easily at the campfire and explain where he was and what he'd been doing because Pixlriiffs had a reason for *everything*.

But his old friend stayed silent. Slowly, Fwhip noticed little details- the dried blood on his arm, the way his hair was matted and crusted with sand, the way his cloak was falling off at the seams. He wore no shoes, and his feet were charred and blackened.

Still, that deathly quiet. Fwhip wondered with a shiver if they had stumbled upon a wraith.

"You've gotta be hungry," he said, stepping aside to open a clear path to the campfire. Gem, snapping back to herself, went to the food pack and started unzipping it. Pixl did not move.

"Pix, please," said Fwhip, stepping forwards, patience wearing thin. "You've gotta be hungry."

When's the last time you ate?"

No response.

"What *happened* to you?" he pleaded, finally, and that was the thing that got Pix to move, looking down at his burnt and blistered feet. Shifting awkwardly. Still no noise.

"Fine," Fwhip sighed, walking over and gently taking hold of Pixl's sleeve, leading him back over to the fire. "You don't have to talk. I'm glad we found you."

The three of them simply sat there, Fwhip and Gem eating, Pixl just staring mournfully at the food lying in front of him like it held some flaming memory that he dared not touch. When Fwhip was done eating, he pushed Pixl's share a little closer to him. Pixl did nothing.

"Are you going to eat that?"

No response.

Fwhip sighed. "Alright," he said. "I know you're probably exhausted from walking out here for gods knows how long. I don't know what happened to you, but you don't have to tell us. I do just want to know if you're hungry, okay? A nod yes and no is alright. If you don't know, a shrug works too. Got it?"

It was so utterly wrong to have to lay these simple rules out bare on the ground, but Fwhip couldn't handle not knowing if he was being understood or not anymore. What was worse was that Pixl was not speaking in his usual rich, full tone, that is to say, not at all. But it was a start.

Fwhip prayed to the gods that he knew somewhere in his soul were dead that it was not the end.

Pix looked up at him, seeming to truly notice him for the first time in a while, and nodded.

Fwhip exhaled. "Alright," he said. "But really, are you going to eat that?"

A shake of the head.

"Are you hungry?"

Shrug.

"Do you want to eat it?"

Blank stare.

He sighed again. "Okay. Gem, is there a chance you can reenchant this?"

Gem looked up. "Sure. It'll last shorter, though."

Fwhip nodded, and handed a morsel to Pixl, who just looked at the food in his hand and back up at Fwhip. "You can have that," he said, getting up. "Even if you're not hungry, a few bites will do you good."

Blank stare.

"Please eat," said Fwhip. He turned around and walked to the fire, kneeling to stoke it, not even checking to see if Pix had eaten anything or not. Odysseus the dragon rumbled. As he took another log from the kindling bag and tossed it onto the fire with a loud thunk, he heard Gem walk over to

where Pixl generally was and start speaking in a low tone, a soothing one. He walked over to Hyacinth, brush still in pocket, and half-listened as he gave her a brush as well.

"I don't think you've met our dragons yet, have you?" Gem was saying now, talking more than she had in a week. "The one you're sitting in front of right now is Odysseus. They're Fwhip's, and he raised them from an egg. The one over there, mine, is named Hyacinth, after the flower. I'm not entirely sure if you've kept up with mythology-" a pause- "you most likely have, but both the names are from an ancient mythology. Odysseus is the name of an old hero who sailed the world to get back to his home, and Hyacinth is the name of a flower that was once a man that a god fell in love with. He got badly wounded, so the god turned him into a flower to preserve his soul. I might tell you the whole thing sometime."

Hyacinth gave him a low warning rumble, and Fwhip realized that he was brushing a bit too close to her eyes. "Sorry," he said to the dragon. "Spacing out again."

"Are you apologizing to my dragon over there, Fwhip?" asked Gem.

"Almost brushed her eyes out of her head, so yeah," said Fwhip gruffly. The silence was thick and asphyxiating. The silence was complete, and deafening, and he could not stomp loudly enough over to the other two people to drown it out no matter how hard he tried. What should have been the two loudest people in this ragtag band of travelers were quiet. There were no crickets. Where were the crickets?

"What a jolly band of wanderers are we," he proclaimed to nobody in particular, leaning back against Odysseus' comfortable bulk and looking up. "The usually talkative witch, the silent man, and the cynical dumbass."

"And with your help, it could get worse," responded Gem.

"Gem, please tell me how this lovely outing could possibly get worse."

"Don't jinx it," she warned.

Between the two of them, Pixl still had not touched his bread and was gazing serenely at the stars, still with that sad, almost haunted look to his eyes. Fwhip tapped him on the shoulder and he flinched, looking at him way too fast, then relaxed when he realized Fwhip was holding out his sleeve to hold onto, maybe. He grabbed it gently but with surprising strength and with that the night was still, and silent again.

Chapter End Notes

here's your friendly author's note that i do not wish any of the relationships that develop in this fic to be interpreted as romantic, no matter how romantic they may seem!

and uh... yeah. pixl straight up doesn't talk in this one. he won't for a while.

if there's any tags i forgot to add, just let me know!

september rains

Chapter Summary

What is one to do when a man he thought he knew has deprecated into a silent, mournful husk of his formal self?

For Fwhip, his answer seems simple. For Gem, though, she's not quite sure what to do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They woke the next morning, Pixl still clutching Fwhip's sleeve like a phantom or perhaps a dream, Gem curled up asleep against Odysseus' comfortable bulk.

In the fading dawn, set against the harsh stone of the destruction of everything, it was almost a poetic sight: these wayworn, bone-weary travelers in a moment of brief rest in a world that had been shaken to its very core.

In a different world, they would have been gods, muses even, of song and sound, words and their fleeting hopes.

But here, they were just human.

Gem woke first.

In the half-dawn, she had been walking a memory: she was seven, maybe eight, and it was the first day of summer. In the dream, there was a fire at her back (oh, how she'd hated the cold as a child!) and a warm blanket over her: the mattress was strangely lumpy, though, and she sleepily wondered if she'd accidentally fallen asleep reading again and, if so, if she'd remembered to mark her page.

Then the dragon next to her exhaled deeply in sleep, and she cracked her eyelids to see the sun filtering in through the membrane of a dragon wing, and remembered where she was. What had happened.

She had always hated waking up.

Step one of waking up after sleeping rough: check your surroundings for immediate danger. Gem stood up wearily, and next to her, Odysseus' rumbling changed tone and abruptly buzzed to a stop. They raised their head, sniffed the air, put it back on the ground. Hyacinth was still fast asleep. No threat here.

Step two: gauge your hunger, thirst, and energy levels. She reached towards the sun and stretched. No hunger. Little bit of thirst. Energy was fine: she'd always been a solid sleeper. She'd have to ask Fwhip and Pix how they were doing when they woke up.

Pix... oh, god.

She walked over as silently as she could to where he was asleep. In the harshness of the sunlight light, he unfortunately looked no better: hair matted and tangled and longer than she'd ever seen

him wear it, most of his skin covered in scrapes and scars and half-healed scabs. She wasn't even going to let herself spend more than three seconds on the state of his clothes. (All of the important bits were covered, thank God.)

He was, somehow, as close to human in this state as she'd ever seen him.

She decided to let the two of them rest. She'd get camp packed up by herself. She stepped back, but as she did, Pix awoke with a start, bolting straight up. He looked around wildly for the better half of a few seconds, shoulders relaxing when his gaze landed on her but still with that mournful, wary look in his eyes.

Gem had spent the better half of last night wondering what had happened to him. Every detail of how he acted- the utter and all-encompassing silence, the flinches at any sounds, all spoke of some deep dread. She figured it'd be rude to ask, though, so she just kept it simple. "Good morning. I was going to let you two sleep for another hour or so while I packed up camp. You didn't eat any dinner last night, would you like some food this morning? We have plenty."

A head shake no.

"Are you hungry?"

Pause. Look down at the ground. Nod yes.

Oh, so that's how it is.

Gem decided to ignore it. They'd solve the food problem later. "Are you going back to sleep?"

Shake.

"That's okay too," she said, turning around and walking towards Hyacinth to wake her up. "I know you just got here, but since Fwhip isn't a morning person, I'm usually the one who gets stuff going in the mornings." She rubbed her hand back and forth against Hyacinth's flank, continuing talking as she did so. "Because we travel light, there's not a lot to do. Mostly, it's just kicking out the fire in the mornings, saddling the dragons, and packing up the bed rolls. Now," she said, reaching down to grab Hyacinth's saddle, "it's probably been a while since the dragons have seen you, so it might take them a minute to-"

The noise of Hyacinth purring caught her off guard, and she looked up to see Pix scratching under her chin, reaching up on his tiptoes.

"Huh," said Gem. She stood there for a minute holding the saddle, then nodded to herself. "Mind doing me a favor and keeping her occupied while I saddle her? It'll only take me a minute."

Nod.

Gem nodded again in response and tossed the saddle over Hyacinth's back, sliding under her stomach to buckle the harness together. She made sure that she could slide a hand between the dragon's stomach and the leather strap, looking over when Fwhip crouched down beside her.

"What?" she asked.

"Rain's coming," he said, and walked off without another word to kick out the fire. Gem sighed, and rolled out from under the dragon again to check the sky.

The past two months, the two of them had been flying northeast, the supposed direction in which

the closest Farlands border was. They'd checked all of their sources from the ruined libraries of Rivendell, crossed and double crossed maps. It was the closest thing to an actual hope they had left.

All of this flying, despite the constance of it, had never led them to encounter a singular serious rain cloud, which Gem was grateful for. Rain was annoying, and cold, and forced them to take detours.

Until now, when she looked over the tall and harrowing mountains that were harboring a growing tempest like a hurricane over the high seas.

She sighed. Things were about to get a little rough.

"Hey, Gem," said Fwhip, saddling his own dragon from the other end of the clearing. "What are we going to do with Pix?"

"What do you mean, 'what are we going to do?'" responded Gem, looking over to the growing shadow on the horizon, hand shading her eyes with vague anxiety. "We can't just let him stay here."

"Well yeah, I didn't mean that," said Fwhip, standing up and dusting himself off. "I mean, who's he going to be riding with? We only have two dragons."

"Oh, yeah," said Gem, turning to look. "Hmm. That is an issue. I guess we could let him choose...?"

Pixl looked between the two of them for a second and walked over to Fwhip and Odysseus, grabbing hold of his sleeve again.

"Well," said Fwhip airily, "I guess there's that problem solved."

Gem sighed. "Just get the bags tied, okay? Cynthi, honey, would you be fine with carrying an extra load?" Hyacinth the dragon looked at her and huffed, which she decided to take as a "yes."

"Onwards, then!" she said, as cheerfully as she could muster.

The lands they passed by, as numerous as they were utterly destroyed, belied no chance of extra food. No beast walked the plains, friendly or otherwise. A few trees remained: scraggly, greying, deprecated.

Fwhip was beginning to worry.

Every day, waking up got more difficult, and not just because of the slow impending spiral that he'd begun to flounder in. It was the heavy dread, the sheer impending doom that hung in the air.

He wasn't quite sure if Odysseus could feel it, but the dragon's wings still beat on as steadily and as comfortingly as usual.

"At least one of us on this godforsaken trip is feeling alright," he said, flicking the reins a little bit to keep up with Gem, who was steadily going ahead. As the dragon accelerated, bumping a bit in midair, a hand clutched his coattails from behind and immediately drew away again.

"It's okay," he said without turning around. "Dragons are terrifying to ride on if you don't have something to hold onto. I don't mind." He was about to say *I don't give a shit*, but he remembered at

the last second that Pix had mentioned once that he wasn't the most favorable of swearing.

That had been months ago, before... this happened.

Did it even matter anymore?

Whether Pix remembered or not, he still heard. Tentatively, Fwhip could feel, he was grabbing onto his coattails again, holding on for dear life.

"Are you afraid of heights?" he asked, turning around to look behind him.

Shrug.

"You can grab onto my waist if it helps," he said, leaning backwards a bit. There was no response for a few seconds, but eventually, there he was: holding on.

Aside from the wind and those few sentences from Fwhip, the flight had been completely silent so far. They'd been going for a few hours now, headed steadily towards the storm in the distance.

Most of this journey, I've discovered while writing it down, isn't very exciting. It consists of some dragons, two slightly estranged siblings, and a silent man with a heavy load on his shoulders.

See, the thing about Gem and Fwhip in this tale is that they'd been tolerating each other for years, as siblings do.

Then, they'd had the option to avoid each other when needed. Now, they were stuck together: two different people stuck in the same situation.

There was a marked difference to how they handled problems and hardship in general, which led to some... interesting conversations. See Exhibit A.

"We should probably avoid that storm," said Fwhip, looking at the approaching storm cloud with an appraising and slightly bored eye. "Thunderclouds are pretty tall, and I'm not in the mood to fly directly through one."

"Oh, come on," said Gem, flicking her reins a little bit. "Avoiding it would make us get to our destination shorter, right? Wasn't our entire goal in the first place to get out of here as quickly as possible?"

"Yeah, but-" said Fwhip, cutting off with a sigh.

"But what?" said Gem.

"It'd be a short avoidance," said Fwhip. "I don't want to get the dragons hurt. We don't even have any clothes for rain."

"Fine," said Gem from the front.

"Also, how do we even know where we're going?" asked Fwhip.

"The dragons know," said Gem confidently.

"How?"

"They just do."

"That sounds like a load of stupid," said Fwhip.

"One day, I'm going to be right, and you're not going to be able to argue with me anymore," said Gem, turning around.

"So you admit you're wrong," said Fwhip, deadpan.

"I never said that!"

And so on, and so forth.

They did end up avoiding the raincloud, flying back in front of it to stay on course after they passed it. They also landed that evening on the coastline of some large solemn lake. In another time, the sunset would have been nice, the views breathtaking. But not now.

"Beef for dinner," announced Fwhip. "Who's hungry?"

"Me," said Gem. Pixl said nothing.

"Pix, you want your steak done well?"

Shake.

"Rare, then?"

Shake.

"Medium-well works, then."

Shake.

"Come on," said Fwhip, getting two slabs of beef from out of the food bag and setting them onto a large iron skillet that had mercifully been spared from the sundering. "You're not being a burden. We can always pick up food on the way. Here, you've got to be starving. I'll cook you a steak."

Shake.

"Pix," he said, turning back around, "you know you've got to eat sometime, right?"

Silence.

"Please," he said, gentler this time. "Listen. We don't know the last time you ate. I don't know what your deal is, but I- we," he said, shooting a pointed look at Gem, "are worried about you. It'll help you feel better. Besides, it's already on the fire, and me and Gem can share one."

"Yeah," said Gem. "Come on. Please?"

Shrug.

"Better than nothing," said Fwhip, and turned around to flip the steaks.

In the end, it was a silent meal. Fwhip and Gem finished first, Pix just staring at his food until Fwhip reached over, cut up a slice, and handed him the fork.

"Eat," he said.

Pix ate. And didn't make another move.

"More," he said. "You don't have to go fast. But can you at least eat half of this?"

Nod.

"Alright," he said, going over to the bags and, unzipping one, taking out the two sleeping rolls him and Gem had packed.

"Do you want mine?" he asked Pix, who shook his head no. Fwhip noted that he had passed the halfway mark in eating his steak. "Okay, then." He settled back against Odysseus, closed his eyes. "Honestly, I'm pretty comfy right here. Gem, you wake me up if anything happens, okay?"

"Sure thing," said Gem.

As he drifted to sleep, Fwhip felt someone sit next to him and lean against him slightly, and he was pretty sure he knew who it was.

At least someone around here's still doing reasonably okay, he thought to himself.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much for all of the comments on this! i try my best to respond to all of them <3

a crack in the walls of the house of life

Chapter Summary

After another two or so days, they stumble upon their first sign of civilization since leaving: a village in the middle of the mountains.

Life continued in this manner like this, and only this for the next two days. Pixl remained silent as the rising sun, Gem shouldered all of the burdens of their graceless and spartan base camp with silent resignation, and Fwhip remained withdrawn and sullen.

As were the silent moon and the grieving clouds the travelers remained, singing a familiar song of silence.

How, eventually, they came to a degraded and long-rotting corpse of a village was beyond their knowledge, but Fwhip figured it may as well serve as a stopping point.

The twin dragons circled the wreck, akin to some ancient and herculean race of vultures decending upon their prey, and finally alighted with a final weight that shook the ground lightly where it stood suspended on its fetters.

"What happened here?" asked Gem. (It was a rhetorical question. All she seemed to ask these days were rhetorical questions.)

"Figure it out," said Fwhip, kicking aside a rock in what might have been disgust and might have been something less bitter and more human. "We should probably look for supplies and stuff like that."

"Stealing from the dead," said Gem, crossing her arms. "Is this what we've come to?"

Fwhip turned around to gesture with one arm to everything around them, encompassing the broken lines of fate that led them here, the dead bodies that probably lay inside of the houses. "Don't fool yourself. It's all we ever were."

Gem could not argue with that, so she went off with a huff.

Pix remained silent, but followed Fwhip from two paces behind.

All of them were scared. Oh, they'd always been scared since the world had broken at their feet, but now they were dreading finding remnants of humanity, bodies entombed in the houses, a last sacrifice to the forces that had doomed them.

Were they scared of death, or the confrontation of life that death would bring?

Only Time can tell, and he's been gone for a while.

Somehow, thankfully, Fwhip stumbled upon no corpses with their hands folded over their chests, but the houses were empty of all that held value for them now.

It felt wrong to be poking around the bones of this ghost town, but Fwhip persisted anyways

despite the unease he felt. Pix stayed outside at the doorways looking in (some Pixandrian custom? personal belief? Fwhip knew not).

"You can go look yourself if you want to," said Fwhip, looking over his shoulder. Pix nodded and was gone, swift as a fox.

That town carried relics in its pockets, Fwhip found. He discovered amethyst and silver wire totems of dazzling intricacy, the facets cracked and dusted, the wire tarnished. He stumbled upon ancient books in a language he could not read, but he shoved one into his knapsack just in case Pix or Gem could decipher it later. He even found a small collar belonging to a cat or very small dog in one house with a soaring roof like that of a chapel. No food, though, or extra water was to be found.

The wind was picking up and he was headed back towards the mounts when he walked into the last house and heard a small gasp.

"Hello?" he called, expecting ghosts, or perhaps a wraith, but it was just Pix.

(Oh well. The two were damn near enough one and the same, anyways.)

Still, that was the most sound Fwhip had heard him make in weeks, and he was half startled, half secretly glad his lungs were still capable of producing sound.

Maybe, he thought, there was still a chance of his friend making a noise again, if just to break the horrible silence. If just to give back some of the patience Fwhip had been lending him.

What a horrible, selfish thought. He discarded it instantly.

Pix was holding a book, and passed Fwhip on his way out.

"Wait," said Fwhip, and he paused. "Can I see that?"

A nod, and the book was lifted in his direction. Fwhip went to reach for it, but it was pulled back.

"Sorry," he said, trying his best to read the title in the rapidly deepening darkness.

The script was not in English, but in a language he vaguely recognized- Pixandrian? Something something lost something.

"How did this get all the way out here?" he asked.

Shrug.

"Did you find anything?" asked Gem, walking up to them.

"Nope."

"Well, me neither," she said. "We should probably get our stuff indoors so that it doesn't get rained on. Pix, did you find a book?"

Nod.

"I found one too," said Fwhip, patting his backpack. "I'll look at it later. Maybe it's in a language you'll understand."

Outside, thunder cracked, and Pix froze where he stood.

"Come on," said Fwhip, walking outside. "We'll find a house with an intact roof."

While Fwhip took the thankless job of finding the dragons a good cave while the storm raced in, Gem led Pix to the most stable-ish of the remaining structures: a small and ramshackle church that was half splintered wood, half stone foundations and miniature flying buttresses that were starting to crack.

As the thunder came again, more insistently this time, Pix looked up, naked fear on his face, and Gem felt more strongly than ever the pity that had been keeping her stomach company lately.

It had started when she had woken up one midnight to see Fwhip lying on the ground asleep, Pix's head resting on his chest.

She knew that they weren't dating or anything like that. Pix had made it clear from the beginning that he never wanted that sort of thing, and Fwhip had better things to do otherwise. But still, there are some gestures that transcend romance, the simple act of caring for someone one of them.

Who was the pity for? She didn't know, and didn't want to acknowledge it at all. Better in these doomed days to simply not feel and keep the important things at the forefront.

"It's alright," she told Pix now. "We'll be inside. You'll be dry there."

Nod.

They walked in.

The small church had once been a well-esteemed place, that much was clear. Its floor was a neat, careful mosaic tile and the vaulted beams in the roof had been subtly carved but still held strong, holding the roof up as Atlas held the sky.

Now, though, dust and grime covered the floors, and a single crack ran through the mosaic in the center.

Gem wondered what gods these people had worshipped, and where they were now.

Either way, though this had once been a place of worship, the candles at the front of the church stood silent and cold. There were no gods left to dedicate any warmth to, clearly.

Gem would have felt a bit of pity, but again, priorities.

The wooden door that hung almost loose off of its hinges opened to reveal her little brother, hair and jacket already dripping rain. "The dragons are in a nearby cave," he announced.

"Good," said Gem. "I have all of our stuff in here."

"If the roof starts leaking, we'll have to get something waterproof," said Fwhip, fiddling with the latch on the door. "Can we get some light?"

Outside, lightning flashed.

"Not like that," he grumbled, and Gem had to laugh.

"I'll get us a lantern lit," she said, rummaging through a nearby bag and praying it was the right one. Fwhip walked over gingerly and sat as the thunder finally came, louder this time, and Pix startled again.

"I never knew you were scared of storms," Gem heard as she clumsily opened the front of the lantern, struck a match, and lit the flame inside."

"It's like a shitty campfire," said Fwhip. He sighed and leaned back against one of the packs. "Well, since this storm probably isn't going anywhere anytime soon, may as well share a few stories."

"Wait, Pix," said Gem. "You don't even know where we're going yet, do you?"

Shake.

"Well, we did our research, and apparently there's some sort of gateway out of the world about a three day's fly from here," said Gem. "We're planning on getting out there, and then... whatever happens, happens, I guess."

"We have no idea how this thing works, or if it's even going to work at all, by the way," said Fwhip, taking off his jacket and scarf and dumping it into a pile besides him. "It's kind of like a last ditch effort to get out of here."

"And if it doesn't work, well, there should be one in the other direction, just farther away from where spawn was," said Gem. "We'll backtrack."

"It's a stupid plan, but it's the best one we've got," said Fwhip. Pix nodded and slid the book he'd found towards himself, not opening it, just looking at it with the same oddly intense despondence that he did everything else, shivering slightly.

The storm was picking up now, wind pushing against the walls outside and swaying the loose strands in Gem's hair. Rain pattered gently on the roof. Lightning struck again, even closer than before, and a loud crack of thunder sounded.

"I heard a story once, when I was a kid," said Fwhip loudly over the sounds of the storm. "It was about this guy who tamed a storm dragon."

Pix scooted closer to the lantern, and Gem sighed and tossed him her cloak.

"The moral of the story or whatever was that this guy, he was scared of heights," said Fwhip. "He didn't get over his fear or anything. He didn't look down the entire time. But he went up that mountain and he told the dragon, please stop destroying my home every season, and the dragon said well I can't do that but here's some things that you can do, things to help.

"The guy went back down and he told the rest of the town what the dragon said. The townspeople were like 'dude, that's crazy, why would we do that?' and this guy got really annoyed and he said 'you know what? I walked all the way up a mountain to talk to this mythical creature and you're not even listening to me.' He was the only one who built the house right." He sighed again, apparently slowly regaining energy. Thunder soared across the space in silence, and Pix startled again, this time jumping over to Fwhip and covering his ears with his hands.

"And when the floods came," said Fwhip, bitterness tinging his voice like water stains on the edge of an old book's pages, "he was the only one that survived."

There wasn't much noise after that. The sky darkened, occasionally lit up by flashes of brilliant white, and slowly, Pix settled to sleep, head over Fwhip's shoulder.

"You know we still don't know what happened or why he's acting like this," said Gem, speaking quietly as so to not wake him up. "He barely eats, and I can tell he doesn't want to."

"Well, yeah," said Fwhip, shifting slightly where he sat. "But..." He trailed off, sighing.

"But what?"

"Nothing," said Fwhip. "It's just. I don't know. Logically, he's taking up all of our time and resources. If we don't find food within 2 weeks, we'll starve. It would make more sense to just leave him there where he stood. And he's traumatized, Gem. You can see that, right? It's just hard. All of this is hard."

"We'll get out," said Gem, trying to be reassuring, trying to put a little pep into her voice. "We'll be okay."

"I hope so," said Fwhip, leaning back and closing his eyes. "I sure do hope so."

Sentinel

Chapter Summary

The storm has cleared, and Fwhip wakes up early to discover that Pix is not there.

Chapter Notes

thank you all for the support on this! i've been planning things out a little bit more for this and have finally figured out the goddamn plot

updates will be sparse because it's the end of the semester and seasonal depression is a bitch but don't worry, guys, i know what i'm doing. i think.

He woke early, before the sun, to an emptiness in the air and a strange silence that said the storm had passed.

Fwhip sat there for a bit, wondering what was so off to him, and realized with a jolt that Pix was neither resting against him or next to him, and was nowhere in the room. Gem was curled up on the floor.

For a second, he considered shaking her awake, then decided nervously that it wouldn't be worth it and just look around for a bit on his own.

As soon as he walked out into the lukewarm evening air, his fears were satiated. There stood Pix, keeping patient guard in front of the church, head tilted to look at the stars and the moon.

For a man who had been fished out of the hands of death by a thin line that was surely cast by some greater force than himself, he looked oddly at peace. At this angle, you couldn't see his eyes: haunted as they were, they'd probably reflect the moonlight more truly than a mirror at this point.

What could he see there? What angels flitted from light to light?

Fwhip tried to walk quietly up to meet him, but Pix heard (oh, he heard everything these days) and turned around, slightly startled.

"Sorry," said Fwhip reflexively. "I was just looking for you, you know, since you weren't in the church."

He looked up as well, just for something to do. Not a cloud in the sky. Just the full moon looking down, suspended in glory while the dirty ground below was bathed in its heresy. Maybe the heretics were the one who made the filth, not the filth itself. Maybe he didn't know anymore. Maybe he never knew.

"I never got the time to properly look at the sky," he said. "Not since..."

Not since the world ended. Not since the wind that animated his cloak in the evenings turned

inwards, bitter and cold.

He sighed and looked down. "I thought you'd ran."

He knew that Pix had stopped to look at him and didn't dare look sideways, didn't look back to meet the stare that was surely accusing him of betrayal, the look that named him a horrible friend.

"Sorry," he muttered again. *Damn it. Change the subject.*

"I don't know why you're up this late," he said, finally looking back over. Pix's gaze had returned to the sky. "Can't sleep?"

Nod.

"Yeah, fair," he sighed. "My sleep schedule's been messed up too, ever since we started going out here. We should probably start keeping watch- unless you're already...?"

Another nod.

"I guess that makes sense, then," he continued. "You're already used to sleeping during the day. Well, I'll make sure you don't fall off the back of Odysseus." He clapped Pix on the back awkwardly and walked back into the church, turning around once. "Wake us up if anything happens, alright?"

Nod.

(He fell asleep that night oddly comforted by the knowledge that if the world truly set on fire, Pix would be the first to know.)

(Didn't he already, though?)

An End in Sight, Part 1

Chapter Summary

"Oh, but what about Gem?"

She's... adjusting.

Chapter Notes

ive given up on the fucking plot man. i have a vague map a handful of events and an end goal but thats it. this fic is in the eternal hands of the nine muses. from here on in, i'm just their vessel

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Gem awoke from a dream that she could not place with emotions that she could not name.

As it were, her half-asleep mind tried to shoddily piece the jumbled bits together: sun on the rooftop, footsteps on the cobblestones, comforting constant babble from Sausage.

Ah. Sausage.

Quickly, she pried her half-asleep body off of the dusty ground. No time to dwell on that. She had things to do, camp to organize, dragons to boot. No time. She'd do her dwelling later.

(Gem, although she didn't know this, hadn't dwelled on anything for years on end. Call it whatever you like, but she believed it did her good. Oh, poor soul, she hasn't realized yet that dwelling might do her some good in the end.)

(As of right now, this won't change anything. She can't hear me. Let's continue.)

About a month had passed since they'd stumbled upon the fallen prophet from the desert.

Their days had taken a steady routine: wake up at dawn, travel northeast. Rest intermittently every couple days to give the dragons a break.

Pix took the night watch always, her and Fwhip the day. She woke sometimes in the middle of sullen midnights to see him standing there like some statue whittled of hardened rock, rarely moving, always silent.

Gem had always held, especially to herself, that she was kind and accommodating and the best out of her siblings at talking to people. Despite this, though, she couldn't help but at least be a little put-off by Pix's sudden hard turn into silence and silent shearing apart of the seams.

Maybe, she thought as the winds whipped silently past, she just hadn't witnessed anyone fall apart as thoroughly as he had.

Fwhip hadn't gotten used to it either. She knew this from the way his shoulders were set when he was talking to Pix, how he gently but still somewhat coldly made sure he got enough portions to eat when it was time for that.

It was like having a lost ghost following you around, persistently there with his thousand-yard stare eyes. Eyes that saw everything. Eyes that saw nothing.

"You know," she said offhandedly one day while cleaning the dragons' saddles with Fwhip, "I wonder what happened to him to be like..." she waved her hand vaguely in the direction of Pix, sleeping in the scant shade of a dangerously thin tree nearby, "this."

Fwhip snorted, still focused on repairing the stitches in Odysseus' saddle with a clumsy but steady hand. "Whatever it is, he's clearly not in a state to tell us. Don't worry about it."

"Well, it is a bit hard to just not worry," said Gem, taking a wire brush to the persistent dust that almost seemed embedded in the leather. "How long do you think he was in that desert?"

Fwhip's hand halted mid-stitch before slowly continuing down the edge of the saddle. "I mean, a while, probably."

Gem hummed. "Do you think it was for the whole time?" she asked anxiously.

"Gem," said Fwhip now, looking directly at her. "He went missing like, eight years ago. There's no way that someone could have survived in the desert for that long. And besides," he said, stealing a glance at Pix before continuing with a sigh, "someone would have to be driven pretty far to..."

"To what?"

"Nevermind," said Fwhip, in a tone that indicated the subject was, as suddenly as it was, closed. Gem nodded and continued scrubbing in silence.

(What Fwhip was going to say was that someone would have to be driven pretty far to do that to themselves.)

Normally, Gem wouldn't press these details, as that simply wasn't a thing that you did. How you asked was subtly, innocently, and then the other person usually opened right up. This was interesting, though, and Gem had a sneaking suspicion that the time for subtlety was long gone.

Also, the society she came from that had taught her these rules had been completely and utterly destroyed, so.

"Oh, hey," said Fwhip as Pix stood up and walked over. Up close, he still looked about the same as he had a month ago, albeit far fuller in the jawline and arms. (If just this scant diet of post-apocalyptic well-cooked meat had improved his state this much, then Gem almost shivered to think how much he must have been eating whilst in the desert.)

(Subtlety. Right.)

"Hello, Pix," she said, injecting a bit of her trademark perkiness into her voice. "Did you rest well?"

Pix just looked at her for a few seconds before giving a small shrug and then, after a short pause, shook his head no.

"Ah," said Gem, not knowing how to respond to that. "Hope you get some good rest soon."

"Yeah," said Fwhip, not looking up from his work on the saddle. "Sleep is kind of important when you're in the middle of the apocalypse."

For one fleeting second, Gem thought she could see the shadow of a smile pass over Pix's face at the joke before it was gone.

Just the wind, she decided.

"Gem," continued Fwhip, oblivious, "do you think you could help me with this curvy thing here? I have zero idea how it works and I'm about to chew through the thread."

"Please don't," said Gem, gingerly getting up to avoid her skirts getting caught in the dust and walking over. "We only have five spools left."

Fwhip snorted.

"You laugh, but with two dragons and two- three people, it's not a lot," she said.

Pix tapped Fwhip's hand and picked up the needle.

"Yeah?" asked Fwhip, turning back around. Pix pointed towards the aforementioned curvy bit of the saddle and, slowly, connected two bits of bone and leather that had been slowly but surely pulling apart.

"Huh," said Fwhip with a small smile in Pixl's direction. "Thanks."

And like the sun shining from behind the clouds for a fleeting moment, Pixl gave them both a small smile back before reverting back to his usual state with an impersonal, almost embarrassed, nod.

Fwhip looked over at Gem, eyes wide, and Gem nodded at him, unable to repress a grin of her own.

"So," said Fwhip, leaning back against Odesseus and clearly trying to act nonchalant about what just happened, "good news! We are about three days out from the portal out of here. Which is great, since we are quickly running out of food and there are very little animals left."

Gem pumped her fist, and Fwhip grinned at her before continuing. "Yeah. It's awesome. I have zero idea where we're going after this, but any world will be better than this, honestly." He patted the dragon's flank, and picked up the nearby spool of thread in a strange sort of toast, pretending to drink from it. "Here's to getting out of this shithole!"

"Fwhip," admonished Gem, but her heart really wasn't in it. Finally, they could get some rest, and get out of here. Pix looked on, tilting his head a bit, expression somewhat softer than usual. It was like that one small smile had been the crack in the gates that let him relax a little. It was beautiful to see.

"There is a chance that this portal may not work, though," said Gem. Fwhip sighed, but waved at her to continue. "What?" she asked. "I'm just laying out all our options here."

"Come on, we finally have a solid chance of getting out, and now you just ruin it?" asked Fwhip.

"I'm not ruining it," said Gem. "I'm just letting you know that-"

"Okay, okay, whatever," said Fwhip. "Go on."

"Anyways," said Gem with more than a touch of annoyance in her voice, "If the portal does happen to be broken-

"-which it probably won't," said Fwhip at Pix, as if to reassure him. Pix just looked back at him blankly, arms folded.

"-then there's a second one a very far way east, back over the desert," said Gem. "It'd be twice as long as our journey here took us, but at least it's a Plan B, right?"

Fwhip shrugged. "I hate it," he said. "I absolutely hate that. But if we have no other option, I'll take it."

"There is no other option," said Gem. "If we don't head out for the second portal immediately, we'll probably waste away."

(In her peripheral vision, Pix drew his knees up, eyes alert. Gem didn't see. Fwhip's gaze was fixed on his sister.)

"Right," sighed Fwhip. "Portal B or bust, then. But hey," he said, excitement growing in his voice, clearly wanting to change the subject, "we're almost there! I think this calls for a celebration."

"Fwhip, we're three days out," said Gem.

"I found," said Fwhip, rummaging around in the food bag and staunchly ignoring his sister, "these." He held up a tiny wild onion and some withered leaves that might have been herbs. "Wild onion, thyme, and a little bit of cilantro."

"Fwhip," said Gem.

"These will go bad by tomorrow," said Fwhip. "If you want to eat another sad meal of cold mutton, be my guest. But I'm gonna grill a steak and it's going to be a good steak and you can pry these herbs out of my cold dead hands."

Gem stared at him, and he stared right back with a steely resolve that did not waver, and eventually she sighed and waved her hand. "Fine. But don't come crying to me when we're down to our last stores."

The air was filled with the smell of cooking meat. Gem had her back turned staunchly away from it, busying herself with the dragons. Let the boys have their steaks. She'd be the responsible one.

If temptation was the devil, then fine! Let her be tested! Gem was no Jesus, but she figured she could hold up just fine.

A couple minutes later, though, that theory was put to the test.

"Dinner's ready!" called Fwhip, sounding far more jovial than usual. Gem turned around, and he waved her off with a grin. "I was talking to Pix," he said. "You can go back to being hungry and sad or whatever."

"Now listen here," started Gem.

"Nope, can't hear you over the smell of this *delicious* steak," said Fwhip, practically skipping away. Gem turned back around and angrily grabbed some kind of half-withered vegetable out of the bag, chewing on it with malicious intent. It tasted like shit. Fine. Whatever.

Over at the fire, Fwhip had neatly divided the steak into three portions and had already cut a strip from his. "Bueno appetito, my friend," he said, pushing one of the portions over to Pix.

"It's 'bon appetit,'" called Gem from her seat near the dragons.

"Can't hear you," he called back, and got a growl in response. Pix nodded thanks and, cutting a small cube off of his portion of the steak, put one in his mouth. Fwhip watched carefully to see his reaction.

Pix's face was a perfect mask of shock for a moment before he quickly took another bite.

"That bad, huh?" joked Fwhip. Pix shook his head no and, after a minute, gently slapped him on the arm.

"Better'n nothing," Fwhip said with a shrug, and put his slice into his mouth. Thankfully, the steak was cooked about as well as you could expect a steak to be in the wilderness, if it was a bit on the tough side. The herbs were what really made the meal, though, and the flavor popped. Fwhip idly wished he had some salt to put on it, but oh well. Before he knew it, his cut was gone, as was Pixl's.

"How's your vegetables going over there?" he said.

"If you don't leave me alone," said Gem, sounding dangerously pissed off. She was cut off by Pixl waving her over.

With a sigh, she walked over, arms folded, determinedly not looking at her younger brother. "What is it?"

Pix took the third portion of the steak (which Fwhip had planned to split between the both of them) and pushed it towards Gem. Her face went from annoyance, to shock, to a bit of pity, then softened, almost, as it seemed, against her will. Seeming to deflate, she sighed and sat down, taking a bite.

"So," said Fwhip.

"I'm going to throw this steak at you," said Gem.

"Did I at least do a good job with it?"

Gem did not reply, although her expression told him she desperately wanted to.

"Alright, I'll stop poking the dragon," said Fwhip with a yawn. "I need to turn in anyways. Pix, are you taking night watch?"

Pixl shook his head, and Fwhip nodded. "Good idea. I think Odysseus will let us know if anything shows up. Besides, I think you might want to be awake when we get to the portal. Night, Gem."

"Night," she said.

She silently finished her steak (which was quite good, actually, although she'd never say it out loud) and walked over towards the dragons. Usually, she leaned against one of them, using their bulk as a pillow, but tonight since Pix was taking a break from the night watch she figured she may as well rest with where he and Fwhip were.

When they'd found him, Pixl had flinched at every touch and every time someone's eyes flicked in his direction, almost seeming allergic to being perceived. Over the past few months, though, he'd

become a bite more comfortable with the two siblings: tapping a shoulder to get attention, accepting hugs, and even gently taking hands to guide them in the right direction when someone was doing something.

Gem figured it made sense that the man whose words were so eloquent back when they fell easily from his lips knew how to speak just as loudly in other ways.

Now, though, Pix's head was resting on Fwhip's chest, and Fwhip had his arm around his back: an oddly gentle scene juxtaposed against the impossible harshness and despair of the world it was enshrined in. Gem walked a bit closer.

She wasn't going to say anything, but Fwhip spoke up. "He has nightmares sometimes," he said, somewhere in between half asleep and exhausted. "I figured it out before we found that church in the mountains. Turns out it's better when he knows someone's nearby, so here I am. Don't make it weird, or I'm shoving you off Hyacinth tomorrow."

"I wasn't going to make it weird," said Gem. "Neither of you are the sort to date anyone, much less each other. I was just checking in on you before I went to sleep."

"Yeah," said Fwhip. "Alright."

"Are you cold or anything?"

"You take one look at me and tell me that I could possibly be cold right now."

Gem nodded and, using one of the packs as a pillow, drew her cloak around her and fell asleep almost instantly.

Rest assured, all three of them slept soundly that night.

Chapter End Notes

WE HIT 10K WORDS LETS GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

thank you all for your patience and support!

An End in Sight, Part 2

Chapter Summary

A line is the fastest point between A and B. We know this to be true. But what are rules to a broken man?

Or,

We are introduced to a different viewpoint. Please heed the chapter notes. Also, Pix tries to singlehandedly fight a bear.

Chapter Notes

warning in this chapter for frequent depictions of passive suicidal ideation, detailed descriptions of suicidal urges, and general severely deprecating self talk. no self-harm attempts are made, but there are some very prevalent undertones of suicidal ideation and related thoughts/emotions described in detail. please be careful and take care of yourself

we, as an author, are staying safe and have been/will be taking breaks whilst writing this chapter if it starts to adversely affect our mood

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"So," said Fwhip, shading his eyes as he looked up at the Vigil. "This is the thing you were talking about, huh? It looks pretty cool."

Pixlriiffs laughed, a deep, full laugh that, as he discovered later, wouldn't come quite as easily in the years to come. "Yep! I figured that since we all die so often, it's probably prudent to at least commemorate that in some way, yeah? At least if someone gets K.O'ed by a zombie, they won't have lost everything they had on them in vain."

"Nice," said Fwhip. "Y'know, that is the exact sort of thing that I'd expect from you. It looks awesome."

"Thanks," said Pixl with a small shrug. "Now, TNT man, don't make my life too hard on me, okay? There's only so much wax to go around."

Fwhip laughed. "No promises," he said. "Now, speaking of TNT, I caught you saying something about gunpowder earlier..."

It had been a long eight years.

Pix woke as the sun rose, one of Fwhip's arms draped over him, Gem somewhere nearby, still asleep.

He sat up, and the world rushed in.

He had identified a pattern, lately. He'd had time to identify a lot of patterns. This one was simpler than most, and it went like this: when he woke up, there were a few blessed seconds of peace when he was still stuck before sleeping and waking before memory bashed in the doors in his mind with a bat and kicked him in the shins for hours. Go to sleep sometime after that, rinse, repeat.

Sometimes he stayed the night up while the dragons were hunting, watching the stars and how they moved. From what he could tell, they were about 35 points west and 7 points north of where he'd been found. Two months. Two entire biomes across.

Pix still did not know why his former friends- no, still his friends. He could allow them that. He still did not know why they had bundled him in with this, this race to the end of the world. Why they fed him their food and gave him space on their saddles and told him, hold on tight, else you'll fall.

Hadn't he already fallen before?

It made no sense.

He ate when they asked him to eat, did every single unfulfilled task in the camp every single day to try and outweigh the burden. What burden? Him, maybe, or maybe he was just scared he was sharing his burden on everyone else. Either way, in Pixandria, when you came over to someone's house, you gave a gift or helped clean up or something to show that their hospitality was appreciated, that if needed, the washing up would not be done alone.

Not like it mattered, anyways. Pixandria was gone.

He sighed and stood up, stretching, letting the dim sun leech some faint memory of energy into his bones before going and starting the day's tasks. Today would be a dragon day, a riding day. He'd fall asleep sitting behind Fwhip for hours, wake up at sunset, eat something if the two of them asked, and take the night watch even though the dragons were there. He would not be responsible for his friends' deaths again. If something came, he would be the first to let them know. Hold it off, maybe, as they ran and took off.

Ah, he thought as he swept the ashes from the fire. What a heroic way to go that would be. Shame it would be if he was more a coward than anything, and ran with the rest of them.

Across the camp, Gem stirred. A while back, she'd always rise with grace- a morning person, she said she was, rising with the sun to greet the day and drown it in polite platitudes. That's what Fwhip said, anyways. Whichever way the cube tumbled, that still held true even so much later: if he didn't wake up first, she always did.

Pix drafted a joke about the two of them being the morning crew in his head, then quickly discarded it. *It's the apocalypse*, he told himself. *You can't just make jokes.*

His thoughts were interrupted by the noise of Gem neatly zipping up her bedroll into a little pack. "Good morning," she said brightly to Pix, who nodded in response before going back to sweeping. The enthusiasm in her voice was forced, he could tell that much, but nobody really cared anyways.

"Do you want breakfast?"

Shrug.

"You've been looking a lot better lately. I think we'll have to forage for some more things later

when we land, but maybe we'll be able to have something fresh when we eventually get to the portal out."

The portal out. Right. To be quite frankly honest, he was planning to be fully dead by now, or at least die when the universe did. But this worked too. Why not. He nodded.

"It'll be rough when we get through," continued Gem, tossing the bags over the backs of the dragons. "I did some research on this right before Xornoth, and apparently there's this huge interdimensional road that goes to everywhere. Me and Fwhip were planning on finding a fresh world, or maybe a hub one to lie low in for a while. Maybe you could come along too, help rebuild?"

Gem, he wanted to say, I am not getting out of here. I am going to die when the last hope does. But he kept his mouth shut.

Out of sight. Out of mind.

Fwhip woke, and bantered lightly with his sister, and then they settled their bodies and hopes on the back of these dragons.

Over the past two months, Pix had treated the twin dragons Odysseus and Hyacinth with nothing less than perfect respect and wariness. Sure, it might just be a personal suspicion of his that dragons could tell if you'd ever killed another of their kin, but it was better to treat all living creatures well anyways.

(Apart from himself, it seems.)

(In the mind of one who has lost all hope, they are the last place they'd ever look for it. Kindness comes second.)

In return, the dragons treated him- well, like most animals would if you kept them clean. He might not have been on the level of a food-giver for those two, as the dragons hunted and fed for themselves quite easily, but they were familiar with him anyways.

When he'd first stumbled into that half-held camp two months waning, he was drawn by the firelight much like a moth was. Thinking it was some sort of warning blaze, or a last torch before all hell broke loose, he peered over a dune just to see two familiar faces looking back at him.

Hello. We knew each other once. Do you recognize me now? My wings are singed from flying the rounds 'round the fires of hell. I've been singing my swan song for eight years and my voice has not given out yet. I wish it would. Oh, how I wish.

He had walked out from behind that dune in all his deprecated and rotting glory, and they had not shot him dead where he stood.

It was a miracle, even though he had long ago given up on miracles, and the fact that his brain still recognized it as one made him bitter for some reason he could not place.

Pixlriifs knew well, possibly better than anyone else, that he had a damn weird relationship with death. He did not actively chase it, but sometimes he'd walk in its general direction. It kept hiding from him. He had grown to resent his death for this.

Maybe the bitterness was that of arsenic, a poison he'd poured for himself. Who knew. He had long ago given up his life to the wiles of Fate and Death. Fate had brought him here. Death clearly was not done with him yet.

So, Pixl did what he did best, and walked amiably on along the path he had been set on, however grudgingly.

He let out a silent sigh and wrapped his arms a bit more tightly against Fwhip's waist. He had long ago trained himself to not look down into an abyss gods know how far and deep, which most people ever saw from the bottom. He had also firmly told himself long ago that physical touch when there is a very real chance of you falling off of the back of a dragon is not weird. If it was weird, Fwhip would have said or indicated so, and he hadn't so far, which meant he was alright.

Well, for a man who wasn't sure if he was more scared of falling off the dragon or the urge that told him to do it intentionally or the fact that he might actually listen to that urge someday, "alright" was a relative term.

He sighed again. This was part of the reason he just didn't talk. God forbid he have to submit himself to the mortifying ordeal of having to ask his friends to talk himself out of... well, you know.

(The word is suicide. He would not say it out loud, even to himself. He was scared of admitting it and the sheer shame of even thinking about something as dishonorable as that.)

Still, his brain went on tangents. Pix takes too many arrows while fighting a horde of skeletons, does nothing to stop it, and dies for good. Pix straight up disappears one day and ruins the entire trip for everyone and the remaining two get the death message days later. Pix falls (or jumps) off of the side of Odysseus the dragon and the last thing he hears as he falls to his death is Fwhip shouting his name...

It was like being forced to watch a grisly play where he was the main character dying constantly and then coming back again. It was horrible. But the other option was talking to distract himself, and gods FORBID he talk.

Instead, he focused on smaller details. The wool that made up of Fwhip's scarf was wearing thin and had little holes in it, and it smelled of gunpowder and sweat. The singed black cloak he still wore had holes burned through it, and it was rough on Pixl's similarly scarred arms. The dragon he sat on was warm, and the flapping of its wings was rhythmic, providing a steady lifeline for his mangled brain to hold on to much like the beeping of a life monitor. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. One, two...

He woke up on the ground as the sun was setting. Someone had carried him to the ground and put a blanket over him. It wasn't even cold.

Somehow, that one small action made him feel even more guilty as well as another emotion he couldn't quite name. It hurt. He had to shut his eyes again and pretend he was still asleep just so that the deep breaths he was suddenly taking could come more regularly.

Nearby, Gem and Fwhip were arguing again. It seemed like nowadays they were always arguing- it seemed to go a bit deeper than usual sibling banter, but still, the rhythm was familiar, and he sat up to listen.

Gem always folded her arms and locked her knees when she was annoyed or anywhere near Fwhip, who meanwhile tended to gesticulate wildly with his hands and pace around. This time, the argument was, once again, about the portal that would allegedly get the two of them out.

"Why would it even be broken?" asked Fwhip now. "It's not like anyone else has used it. All of the

other empires are literal years from here on foot. How far are we out?"

"I don't know, but it's a lot," said Gem. "Anyways, the problem isn't that the portal might be broken. It's that you refuse to see past it."

"I'm not," said Fwhip.

"Then why are we even having this conversation if not because you're convinced nothing could ever go wrong ever?"

"Things have gone wrong!" said Fwhip, gesturing to the world around them. "I know this, Gem. I was partially directly responsible for it. I had to go ahead and get possessed by that stupid goddamn deepslate redstone. I was the one who made that alliance with Jimmy at the end and then the damn generator exploded and summoned Scott's bastard demon brother thing. I'm not shifting the blame, Gem," he concluded, more quietly now, eyes flinty steel. "I'm just trying to look on the bright side for once."

Gem was silent for a minute. There was no noise but the rasp of the wind through the grass and thunder far off in the distance.

"You," she said quietly and with some unidentifiable emotion in her voice, "have always been optimistic to a fault." And with that, she turned around and began collecting bits of food to make for dinner.

Fwhip just stood there for a few seconds after that before noticing Pix was awake, giving him a little wave, and walking over to sit next to him.

"I'm glad we're almost there so that we can finally get that argument over with," he grumbled, staring at the ground in silence for a bit. They sat there for a moment and watched the sun lay down its terms for the day's ending: glory today, a quiet smoke tomorrow.

"My boots are starting to fall apart," said Fwhip, tugging on the soles of one and sighing as it fell apart. "I don't even know how to fix mine. Are yours...?"

Pix shook his head as quickly as he could, glad suddenly that his legs were crossed. The truth was, his sandals had fallen apart completely by... oh, after about a year in the open desert. He hadn't worn any since.

Fwhip, seeming to realize this, was silent for a minute. "Oh. So, you didn't... oh."

In Pixl's head, that little nagging voice started back up again. *Pix gets kicked out of the group and is left to wander alone again, until the world dies...*

He had to look at the ground. Now, just now, he couldn't move. If he moved, he would surely break into little pieces. He heard Fwhip get up and walk away. He heard him talking in a low tone to Gem. The other shoe would drop any minute now. Maybe they'd set the dragons on him. Maybe he'd deserve it.

"Pix," said Gem gently from above him. He shook his head. A gentle hand was laid on his shoulder. "It's okay. Look at me."

Somehow, he looked up.

The face that looked back at his wasn't angry, or disgusted, or even annoyed. Just vaguely... sad?

"I'm gonna make you a pair of sandals," declared Fwhip from nearby. Pix shook his head again, but his friend plowed on. "Dude, your sandals broke gods know how long ago! Least we can do is give you a second pair. And besides, going barefoot for that long isn't good if you're traveling like we are. It's gotta hurt. A lot."

That's the point, Pix wanted to say. Why are you doing this?

But he didn't.

(Out of sight. Out of mind.)

Instead, he simply nodded once, and let the overwhelming fear that filled his brain that these two were fighting for a lost cause, wasting resources for nothing, start chattering again. Well, not let it. It did what it wanted.

And the night slipped on, noiseless, on the padded feet of night terrors and gentle wind.

"Okay," said Gem, walking out of the forest with a block of wood salvaged from the gods know where. "Now we just have to put straps on it."

"With what?" asked Fwhip, who was desperately rummaging through his personal bags to find the toolkit he KNEW he'd packed in there when they'd left. It wasn't there, it definitely wasn't there, and it wasn't... agh.

"I have no idea," said Gem, shading her eyes as she looked out over the forest clearing they were in. The dragons were just a treeline behind them. "Leather or something? This was your idea, you know."

Fwhip let out a heavy sigh and started walking around, searching for a cow. Nobody had hunted for anything in a few days, so maybe he could scrounge some beef off of it.

It was silent for a few seconds. Then Fwhip stopped where he stood: "He didn't have shoes."

"What?"

"He hasn't been wearing shoes the entire time," said Fwhip. "Eight years. The desert baked through my boots even during the evenings when I used to go and visit it, and he was walking around it shoeless for the past eight years." The thought that someone could do that to himself was horrifying, but the fact that it was his friend who was affected by it? That was almost unbearable to think about.

"Yeah, that's mildly worrying," said Gem. "I think I hear a cow."

"*Mildly worrying?*" asked Fwhip. "Gem. You see the state that he's in. Do you think the most of someone's problems when they've been wandering around one of the most inhospitable places on Earth for eight years is that their shoes broke?" He paused, listening, and drew his sword. "It's behind those trees. Sounds like a decently sized one, too."

Rustling came from behind the trees. Gem readied her staff, Fwhip his sword, waiting for the cow to come out so they could kill it without trouble and finally get some-

"Fwhip," said Gem.

"What."

"That's not a cow," said Gem, backing up a step.

"Come on, man," scoffed Fwhip. "Cows are big. We'll be f-"

A bear stepped out into the clearing.

"Son of a," started Fwhip.

"Come ON," yelled Gem, and, aiming a beam of magic at the bear, pulled him by the arm. "You can save that for later!"

Shit.

Oh, goddamned shit. Oh no.

"-godsdamned horseshitting lanky head ass looking GRIMLANDS FRIED DOUBLE DEALING FUCKIN' GOLDEN GOOSE," continued Fwhip as he ran towards the camp. "PIX. GET THE DRAGONS. THERE'S A MOTHERFUCKING **BEAR**."

Pix, who was busy reading his book, looked up just as they entered stage left, followed by a bear. His eyes widened almost comically, then hardened as if imbued with some infinitesimal resolve, and he reached over for a quarterstaff nearby.

Hyacinth the dragon growled, and the bear paused in its tracks for a moment, seemingly weighing its chances.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit," whispered Fwhip, out of breath, desperately tugging on Pix's sleeve to get him to safety behind the dragon. "Pix. Come *on*."

Pix, instead of walking back to safety, instead turned around and gave him a stone-cold glare, surprising Fwhip just enough to loosen his grip on his sleeve.

And the destitute king ran- not away, but right towards the bear.

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?" screamed Fwhip after him, running directly at him without a second thought. Somehow, he managed to grab hold of his friend's sleeve again. He yanked as hard as he could, digging his feet in as far as he could and dragging backwards, just as Hyacinth let loose a huge column of flame.

When the smoke cleared from the air and the three travelers had stopped coughing, there lay on the ground a very dead and very crispy bear.

"Dude," said Fwhip, still hacking a bit, pulling Pix behind the dragon next to Gem. He took him by the shoulders and looked him dead in the watering eyes. "Dude. What the fuck were you thinking? You could have died. What was that- the dragons were right there, they had it- dude. *Dude*."

Pix looked at the ground, obviously attempting to avoid all confrontation, but Fwhip had him solidly in a hug before he could move. Almost instantly, Gem was there as well.

"Please don't try that ever again," she said into Pix's shoulder. "Please."

Pix let out an almost silent sigh and nodded, putting his head on Fwhip's shoulder. Slowly, he returned the hug, and his breathing came a little bit easier.

Behind them, they heard a moo.

Fwhip whipped around to see a cow sniffing the bear carcass, Hyacinth eyeing it warily.

"Hey Gem-" he started.

With no warning, Odysseus blasted the cow with a column of fire, increasing the "dead mammal currently lying on the ground" count up to two. Next to Gem, Pix just blinked.

"Huh," said Gem after a short silence, hands on hips. "Well, it looks like we found our cow?"

Chapter End Notes

real talk: this was a really heavy chapter, and when i set out to write it i didn't understand just how dark it would become. it is essential to the narrative and understanding pix's character in this au, though.

although the "comfort" and "it gets better" part of this work are still to come, i promise for those who are willing/able to continue to read this as it updates that i did not put those tags there as an empty promise when i drafted the first chapter way back when. the healing will happen. i promise.

to those who cannot continue reading this due to personal, emotional, mental, or any other reasons, please prioritize your mental health and safety over keeping up with a work that may cause you to spiral. kudos and comments and heavy angst like this is all well and good but we care far more about our readers' lives and wellbeing than we do engagement on a fic

stay safe out there, y'all, and we promise we will try our absolute best to do justice to the long, slow process of getting better. <3

-Keys

An End in Sight, Part 3

Chapter Summary

After two long, hard months of travel, they show up at one of the gates to the world. Fwhip and Gem are eager to get out, Pix decidedly less so.

Or,

A couple plans fall flat on their face.

Chapter Notes

hey guys sorry for the late release on this chapter- my power went out, i had to bust my ass for four days to pass one of my classes as well as doing twelve tests and three exams, California Gurls got stuck in my head, and we got a cat!!!!!! it's been one hell of a two weeks lol anyways enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

One hour till they arrived at the portal, according to Gem's estimates, and Fwhip was trying his best to stay calm.

To keep his hands from fidgeting, he stole glances downwards ever so often at the huge mountain range gliding serenely on below them. The portal was somewhere on the other end of the range by Gem's estimates, and judging from the height of the peaks, they were getting close to midway.

"Excited?" called Gem from the front, looking over her shoulder with a wide grin on her face.

"Damn right I am," Fwhip yelled back over the noise of the wind in his ears. Behind him, Pixl shifted slightly, but he payed it no notice.

(There's really no adequate way to fill in a long empty stretch of travel with words. You have to give an outline and draw lines faintly between for the shape of the story to take place.)

(So let me cut this hour down a bit for you.)

Have you ever been to a shallow shoal where the sea shines placid and blue? Think of the perfect sky you might think of while there, the sort that sunburns the heretics down on the ground and lifts the birds aloft in their ever circling flight.

Yeah. The sky was like that. It was really pretty.

Fwhip often wished he could just lay flat on his back on Odysseus and watch the clouds soar by, but the dragon was moving too fast and Pix was seated behind him. Besides, he needed to guide it anyways- both for his mount's wellbeing and his own as well. Odysseus would follow Hyacinth to the four ends of the worlds, but he had been known to dive suddenly for a flock of particularly enticing sheep.

Instead, Fwhip simply sat back a little and let himself go on autopilot, eyes straight forwards, brain mulling over some things and switching between them at a rapid pace. Now, a song stuck in his head, now it was what he might cook for dinner tonight, now it was his plans for when they eventually got out of this godsforsaken world.

Fwhip had plans, oh yes. He figured the three of them would find somewhere else to go, and then him and Gem could somehow get a nice house with a decent bit of size to it, and books for Pix, and eventually everything would be okay again. It would maybe even go back to how it was. He would banter with his sister, and Pix would inevitably find a cat and bring it in and laugh when it tried to scratch him.

That beautiful naive fantasy was quickly replaced with excitement, though, when Fwhip's sight suddenly locked onto a dark-looking rise in the distance.

"Is that it?" he yelled.

"I think it is," Gem called back. Fwhip leaned forwards, urging the dragon faster. Finally. Finally, they could rest a little. Walk a bit through the eternal darkness, find a welcoming world, find an inn maybe. Talk to people again. Rest up for a week.

In front of them, the huge jagged spire that wasn't quite manmade but not entirely natural either rose like a finger pointing upwards towards hope, towards rest, towards sanity.

Fwhip slowed Odysseus down and circled the spire a few times, realizing as he did so that something wasn't... it just wasn't quite right.

"Gem?" he called over as he landed and stumbled off the dragon. He lost his balance and fell to his knees, looking up as he did so and catching his breath.

"Yeah?" asked Gem, walking over and looking at the spire as well. "Oh."

"Yeah," said Fwhip. "Yeah."

To put it very simply, the magic portal spire thing that Fwhip understood about as well as he did women (which is to say, not very much, despite once having dabbled in being a woman himself) was fucked up. Very, very fucked up. He sat back onto his ass and just kept staring.

"Please tell me we can do something with this," he said to Gem without looking at her. "Please." It was more of a plead to the universe than it was to her, but she shook her head anyways.

"I am getting some very bad vibes from this," she said. "Very, very bad."

"Well, great," said Fwhip, as sarcastically as he could, flopping backwards. "Fucking fantastic."

"We do have a backup plan, you know," said Gem.

"No, I'm just mad that you're right for once," said Fwhip.

"For *once*?"

On the opposite side of the two of them, Pix let out a huge sigh. The noise was so unexpected yet so familiar that the two siblings stopped their bickering to look over immediately in shock. Pix raised an eyebrow as if to say, "What is it now?"

Fwhip shrugged and, standing up, turned towards the spire with his hands on his hips. "Well, that's

not good."

"You don't say," said Gem, walking closer and putting a finger on the spire tentatively, drawing it back almost as quickly and shaking it like water had gotten on it. "It's oozing."

"Oozing?" asked Fwhip, walking a bit closer. "I'm pretty sure that's obsidian, Gem. Obsidian doesn't ooze."

"Well, this one does," said Gem definitively. "It's also really, really hot, so don't touch it."

"What is it even oozing anyways?" asked Fwhip, flipping his goggles down habitually and squinting at it through the grime, taking it off his head and rubbing at it furiously with his cloak. "Gods, I need to clean these."

"It reminds me of- hmm," said Gem, circling it. "You know those shattered portals that are just in random places somewhere sometimes? Some of them seem to be oozing this same purple stuff. Whatever it is, it can't support nether portals, I've tried. It definitely won't be able to harness enough energy to get out of the world in this state."

"So we're doomed," said Fwhip.

"We're not doomed," said Gem.

"The portal's broken, we came all this way-"

"-we have a backup plan, and we're going to be okay."

"Gem-"

"No," she said firmly. "Shut up. Just shut up. Look, the sun is setting. We are all going to sit here and watch the sun set."

Fwhip sighed, turned around, and sat with his knees up to his chin, sulking. Gem sat down carefully on the soil, messing with a few loose strands of hair. Pix sat cross-legged, head resting on chin, impossibly matted hair glowing a dark gold in the waning sunlight.

A prophet, a wizard, and a mechanic sat on the cliff and watched the sun set.

(Almost sounds like the start of a joke.)

Eventually, Gem got up to start the fire and set up camp, and Pix followed after. Fwhip joined them after checking that the dragons were comfortable, and they all sat and ate a meal of slightly charred beef seasoned with some withered herbs Gem had stashed before they'd left.

"You know what would make this meal even better?" said Fwhip, mouth full.

"What?" asked Gem.

"Some freshly churned Helanthian butter," he said. "Maybe some salt and garlic from their vaults. Some of the good mushrooms from Shelby."

Gem giggled a bit. "Oh, you're right," she said. "Frying oil from the Lost Kingdom..."

"Ooh, now we're talking!" said Fwhip. "Mutton from Rivendell..."

"Redstone dust from your mines," said Gem with a grin.

"Gem."

"What? Everybody knows you eat redstone these days!"

"The only red thing I'll ever eat," proclaimed Fwhip, waving his fork around loftily, "is a side cut from the sacred wool of the Blood Sheep. With Sausage's permission, of course."

Gem's hand paused where it was holding her fork, then resumed its slow journey up to her mouth. The silence was thick. The air was going cold.

(Fwhip almost wondered if there were ghosts in it. He decided that he would, if he believed in ghosts.)

"Sorry," he said quietly.

"It's alright," said Gem in a tone that said louder than her chewing that it was not alright. It hadn't been alright for a while, maybe.

(Some griefs envelop you in black ice, and some are like swords you fall back on every time you remember them.)

Pix, noticing the shift in the air, looked inquisitively at both of them, saying nothing.

Gem saw this and, with a visible effort, looked him dead in the eyes. "It's not like he would be able to ask Sausage anyways, since he's most likely," she took a deep breath, inhaling the ghosts (air.) that surrounded her- "dead."

Fwhip had not expected her to say the truth so bluntly, nor had he even expected her to say it at all. But there it was, out in the open: a burning ember that threatened to set the rest of the forest on fire.

Pix leaned forwards and rearranged a loose stone that lay around the firepit.

"Yeah," he said. There wasn't really any other way to continue after that.

Gem sighed, looked at the ground. "Sorry," she said in a would-be lighthearted tone. "I guess I've been sitting on that one for a while." Pix nodded in understanding.

"I think we've all got some things we've been sitting on," said Fwhip, trying to lighten things up. "For example, I'm currently sitting on the ground."

"I didn't mean it like that, but yeah, that works too," said Gem, taking another bite. "I think... I think the sheep would taste good too. We might be struck down by lightning if we tried, though."

"Yeah, palace guards coming after us with poleaxes and stuff," said Fwhip.

Gem nodded and stood up. "I'm going to go pee."

"Stay safe."

"Shut up."

A couple hours later after the other two had gone to bed, Pix got up from the fire and silently slipped out of its glow, walking the middle distance to the portal. Stood in front of it. Looked up. Hands in pockets.

After Gem had returned, her and Fwhip had discussed plans to go back west- Fwhip uncharacteristically serious, nodding over a map next to his sister. Pix hadn't paid much attention. His mind was mulling over a different plan.

Should he leave, or should he stay?

The answer was not simple, but he desperately wished it was. Oh, how he wished.

See, Pix was caught in the middle ground of a ruthless internal war, of which there were three parties: himself, his soul, and his mind. The war was fought over the decisions he should make, and there were never any truces.

You should leave, said his mind, piping up again. *You're only being a burden- living off of their backs, eating their food. If we ran, we might finally get a chance to escape.*

Pixl knew what the escape was. He was too tired to argue against it at this point. If he died, there might finally be some peace in his skull, if he had a skull left to inhabit and a soul to give peace to.

See, this was what really kept him up at night: that decision.

If he did choose to run, give himself up to whatever force governed the universe, how would he go about it? How would it end, if it ever did? How would he reconcile doing that to himself? Would he even be strong enough to?

No, said his mind with a small, condescending sigh. *You're too much of a coward.*

Make up your mind, he told it.

You make up yours, it whispered back.

Too cowardly to leave, too exhausted to stay. He was stuck. Utterly, irreversibly stuck.

A smaller, gentler voice piped up in the back of his skull. *You could stay.*

And what? his mind sneered. *Do nothing? Achieve nothing?*

I could hope, responded his soul.

Too much pain, responded his brain. *Not worth it.*

Pix sighed, a deep, weary thing, and tried his best to focus on the spire rising in front of him. This argument had been going on for months, and every time it started over he knew how it was going to end. Futile. A closed circle.

The prospect of death terrified him, drew him in, luring him ever closer. Once, Pix had watched a moth circle a freshly lit candle a few times before coming too close and setting itself on fire. By the time it had fallen, it was little more than ashes.

I'm going to sleep, he thought tiredly. *I'll decide tomorrow.*

(Will you?)

Fwhip sat next to the fire, small block of wood in hand, and stubbornly chipped away at it with a chisel.

He was fashioning it into a pair of sandals for Pix, and although the going was slow and often clumsy without machinery, he was determined to finish the project before they continued west.

A shadow reentering the firelight caught his eye, and he looked up to see Pix skirting the edges, eyes on the ground.

"Hey," he said. Pix looked at him with that eagle's-eye stare, and he lifted the sandal he was working on a bit.

"I was thinking," he said, "that since we were going to be here for another two days at the least, maybe we could try and patch up your cloak or get your hair untangled or something? I've been working on carving you some sandals, too, since your feet don't look too good and it's not good to travel without shoes, y'know."

Pix just looked at him, and he shrugged and looked down as he continued. "I don't know. I just feel like we haven't really been doing a lot to help you get better. You've been doing a lot around here, and I think I own you..."

He trailed off as he looked up and realized Pix was gone.

Oh, shit.

Briefly, he considered just waiting for him to get back, but there could be weird shit in these woods. Besides, he thought, standing up, he didn't want to lose his friend. Not again. Not like this.

I thought you'd ran.

"Why can't Gem ever follow him into the deep, dark woods?" he muttered to himself, walking as fast as he could in the general direction Pix had gone without tripping over a tree root.

This man could be anywhere, he thought with a slight hint of panic. *To the left, to the right, he might have just gone back to the dragons, or-*

Or, he could be right there.

In the middle of a small clearing he stood, looking very much like a statue, looking up at the moon.

Fwhip walked forwards a little bit and Pixl looked over his shoulder, a very human fear in his eyes. It pierced.

And in that singular moment, Fwhip understood.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he called, immediately regretting his word choice. Pix wasn't a scared animal. How stupid.

...Actually, maybe he was.

Fwhip thought back to all the times he'd startled slightly those first few weeks after finding Pix, thinking he was a husk or some sort of zombie. He'd seen Gem do the same, although she kept it under a mask of pleasantries.

He thought of the empty look in his eyes and how different it was to the expression he wore now, and he decided right then that whatever slippery slope Pix had slid into that made him seem less than human had suddenly gone flat.

The scales had tipped, motherfucker.

They walked back to camp together silently.

The next morning, Gem was checking inventory and throwing ashes and dirt over the fire when Fwhip walked over, his tool bag slung over one shoulder.

"I think we need to try harder," he said.

"Try harder to what?"

"Help Pix," he said. "He's dealing with something that I haven't figured out yet, but I'm not gonna let him fight it on his own. Are you in or not?"

Gem tossed a handful of dirt on top of the fire, stood up, looked her younger brother in the eye.
"I'm in."

Chapter End Notes

the cat's name is artemis btw he is currently asleep on my office chair he is so sweet and i love him.

also i'm so sorry about the pacing in this chapter i hate it but i already scrapped it once and i didn't feel like doing that again

interim (wouldn't lose you for the world)

Chapter Summary

Two days may not seem like a lot, but when it's rainy and you're stuck in one place, you get a lot of time to sit and chill.

Or,

Haircuts are given, stories are shared, and some sandals are finished.

Chapter Notes

hey y'all here's a more slow-paced chill chapter after the wildness of the past few, especially since the next couple i have planned are gonna be important to the storyline too! hello to all of the new readers who have submitted questions and commentary over on our Tumblr (same username as here, askbox is always open!) and old readers alike :]

since we're maybe a third through the work (or half, i don't know, i need to refine the general plot a bit more), i'd also like to say thank you to the group chat i'm in with my two friends Twine and Anzy who help me figure out the littler details and provide feedback! i'm writing this partly for myself, partly for them, and partly for the five people here who actually keep up with this lol

all in all, yeah. it's been one hell of a winter writing this, but spring is here now, and it's finally getting warmer :]

commentary over! let's get on with the chapter, shall we? be warned, it's a long one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Gem looked up.

"Rain's coming," she said simply.

Fwhip groaned and turned over in his sheets. Nearby, Pix looked up a little bit, but continued brushing down one of the dragons' saddles.

Fwhip had retreated back into the blankets shortly after announcing his intents to help Pix, and now the three of them were sort of mulling around the clearing on one side of the flat hilltop, watching the clouds amble in. It was a quiet morning, a calm one, and a most welcome reprieve from the hustle and scuttle of the past couple of months.

Somewhere in the folded spread of mountains and their daughters the molehills, a lone bird sang for the morning's rising and the rain to come. Wisps of clouds wandered about above, heralding stormy days and nights to come. Rain was coming soon, and it'd wash everything clean. Hopefully

it would, anyways.

Gem herself was working on preparing a small force field around the fire so that they could at least stay dry and somewhat warm when the rains came. All it took was some chalk- ground amethyst was preferred, but this was all she had- and a couple of incantations. Simple work and familiar. This was a thing she could do in her sleep.

"Fwhip," she said, not looking up from the ground as she knelt like a prophet in front of her god. "Come in here, I'm getting a small forcefield ready."

"I'm not moving," he said grumpily from his spot under the blanket.

"Come on."

"Make Pix do it. I'm tired and this bedroll is warm."

Gem raised her eyebrows and looked over at Pix, freshly awoken, who looked up at her and then back down at the saddle in his lap, uninterested. Gem looked back at her brother with no small measure of amusement and annoyance. "I don't think he wants to. Besides, he's been doing half the work in this camp for months. I think he deserves a break."

Fwhip did not move.

"If you don't get up soon," said Gem in a deliberately casual tone, continuing to spread chalk in a circle with a steady hand, "I'm going to pick you up and toss you into the fire myself."

Fwhip did not move.

Okay, then.

With an annoyed sigh, Gem stood up. "Have it your way, then," she said, picking Fwhip up by the torso and slinging him over her shoulder. Despite being fought violently the whole way, she kept walking stubbornly on towards the fire as the dragons (and Pix) watched on with interest.

Let them be her audience, she thought grumpily. If she was going to sacrifice her brother to the gods today, may as well have a witness.

"Okay! Okay!" pleaded Fwhip, wide awake now and desperately pummeling her back. "*Please* put me down. Holy shit."

"You can drag your bedroll back over here, it won't take more than five seconds," said Gem, still dangerously close to the flames. "If you want to sleep in the rain, though, be my guest."

"Please don't throw me into the fire."

Well, since you asked so politely to, sure. Sure.

Gem put him back down on the ground slowly and looked him in the eye for about five seconds, then smiled innocently. "I wasn't going to, you know," she said, walking off.

"I don't believe that," grumbled Fwhip. Despite his stubborn protestations, he grumpily picked up his bedroll anyways and set it down next to his bag.

"We don't really have a lot to do today, I don't think," said Gem, watching the clouds slowly approach while pretending like the past minute didn't exist. "Maybe we should stock up on some firewood and take it slowly?"

Fwhip nodded, still annoyed and searching his toolbag for something, but Gem got the feeling that he wasn't really listening. She nudged him gently with one boot as she walked past him to look at the forest with hands on her hips. "I think I'll go and do that then, since it looks like it's going to be raining for a while."

"Have fun," said Fwhip grumpily, taking two identical blocks of ash wood out of his toolbag and taking a chisel to it.

"Pix, would you like to help me get some of this?" asked Gem, looking over. Pix looked up and nodded, and so the two of them walked into the forest picking up sticks as they went, Gem humming a small rainsong as she walked.

(Rainsong (noun): a short hymn-like tune often sung by residents of the Crystal Cliffs before rain or storms, wishing for plentiful rain in the dry season and shorter drizzles in the wet. Some scholars classify it as a form of prayer, but most speculate that it is a form of spell. The residents of the Cliffs have never elaborated on their use.)

And time trod on with cloven hooves.

(Scene: a forest in the middle of the end. The beginning has long ago ceased. The end has not yet approached.

Enter Geneveve Tay, absent of griefs she thought she'd forgot. Enter Pixl C. Riffs, aware of horrors he knows he remembers. Both are missing something on different sides of the wound, but neither are aware of it yet.)

Walks through forests had always been one of Gem's favorite ways to meditate back home. She felt herself falling into a familiar rhythm, pace slowing down, looking up at the scattered tessellation of ashen leaves above. Birds wheeling somewhere above, way up there. She could not hear them. She could not hear them.

What fires had the demon wrought to utterly rend the living where they stood, even this far out?
What embers shone on raven's wings and crow's nests and the sunset on the sea?

Lost in memory and thought and thoughts of sunlight in seasons past and seasons future, she continued on, absently picking up sticks as she went, completely forgetting about her companion until she heard a small breath from behind and turned around to see Pix leaning against a tree, face up, looking pained. (Silly girl. You have to be gentle with him. He's not ready to be healed just yet.)

"Oh," she said, walking back. "Was I going too fast?"

Small nod. (He'll admit it, at least, but not out loud.)

"Well then, you should have just told m- let me know," she said, coming across perhaps a touch more bossy than she intended. "If you're having a rough time, you can go back and take a break- I can handle the rest of this on my own."

Pix stood up from where he was leaning on the tree. He looked conflicted, and his lips parted a bit as if to say something (say something.), but then he closed them again and shook his head firmly. (Alright, then.)

Bending down to grab the firewood and continuing after Gem, the two continued down the path with Gem leading, at a far slower pace this time.

"I wonder what type of forest this is," said Gem half to herself, bundling the firewood under her arm. "It looks alpine in a way, but there are also ash trees, which usually are only found in the plains."

The rain pattered on the leaves. Around them, the wind ambled on, whispering tidings from the myriad corners of the world: doom, death, destruction, echoes of shadows. Pay it no mind.

Gem sighed, mood dampening a bit. "And then," she said, voice tinged with unnamed bitterness, "the demon came and ruined it."

(Behind her, though she couldn't see it, Pix was frozen in place. He shook his head and kept on before she could turn around.)

"There's got to have been some trees that were sprouting before Xornoth came," she continued, picking dead branches off of the ground. "I wonder if they'll grow as tall as these." A pause. "I wonder if they'll be able to grow up at all?"

7 months since she'd left the scene of the crime on the back of a myth with her brother. The repercussions had to be there. They had to be somewhere.

A finger tapped her shoulder, and she stood up and turned around to see Pix looking at her, shaking his head softly.

(That was fast. Good for him.)

"Subject change?" she asked.

Nod.

"Alright, then," she said. She could see the clouds moving in now: the rain was almost here. Better move quickly lest they get soaked.

Pix followed her gaze up, but he was looking at the leaves, not what was beyond them. He pointed up at the canopy.

"Trees?" asked Gem.

Pix paused then shook his head, pointing insistently at a nearby trunk. Gem walked over, arms still full of unripe ashes, and looked at it. "That's an ash tree."

Pix nodded, then gestured towards the rest of the ash trees nearby.

"Mhm, there's more," said Gem, not quite understanding what Pix was trying to get at.

Pix shook his head, then sighed and turned around with one of the bundles of wood under his arm, waving his free hand in a "nevermind" gesture.

"Alright, then," said Gem, politely confused but following him anyways.

(Don't worry. She'll understand later, trust me.)

The wind was relentless. The pattering pinpricks of rain raked their serpentine fingers against the living and the silent alike. Storms, when you are in the middle of them, seem to be of living things sometimes: they glide, they roar, they demolish, they breathe.

In the middle of this whirling maelstromic dance of light and death, a small fire burned with the quiet intensity of a homestead's hearth.

Gods of sleep and gods of poetry, your pit stop is located here.

As the rain picked up, Gem ducked under the protective dome of the force field and landed next to Fwhip, firewood spilling out her arms and landing scattered like ashes around the fire.

"Hello," said Fwhip, unbothered, chiseling away at the sandal he was carving.

"Hi," said Gem, taking a moment to sit back and breathe a little.

The rain fell harder now: echoes from the drums of the armies of the sea.

"So," she said, sitting up a little. "Since we're going to be here for a while, maybe we should take inventory?"

"I did that yesterday," said Fwhip, not looking up, still intently focused on the task at hand. "Far as I can tell, we're good to go for everything."

"Food?"

"Yep."

"Firewood?"

"Yep."

"Water?"

"Currently collecting some in a bucket."

"Are the dragons well-kept?"

"Gem, we have been scrubbing those saddles religiously for the past couple of months," said Fwhip, looking directly at her.

"Good point," said Gem.

Across the fire, framed by the fingertips of the idly shifting flames, Pixl with his tangled beard and long matted hair and air of impertinent grief was sitting crosslegged, one hand in his lap, turned partway. His other hand stretched beyond the boundaries of the force field, palm up to the rain.

His expression could not be discerned, but Gem got the sudden and strong feeling that this was a man who had wandered somewhere close to peace and was utterly still; wondering, testing the air for this new change.

"I think that's everything, then," said Gem, not taking her eyes off of Pix.

"Really?" asked Fwhip, back to focusing on his carving. His file made a soothing rasp as it softened the edges of the sandal, like the footsteps of a camel over sand.

"Yeah."

"Nice."

Pix poked his forearm out into the rain. After a small pause, he drew it back into the small island of dry land and in one swift motion pulled the sand-covered hooded cloak he wore off his shoulders, revealing a simple dark brown tank top underneath. He stood up and walked out into the deluge: a single tall man, motionless in the rain.

Even with the reduced visibility that came with water and water and water, Gem could discern the severe tan lines that were drawn where the fabric of the shirt fell.

"Oh," she said softly. Fwhip did not hear.

"So, since that's the important stuff out of the way," Fwhip said next to her, oblivious, "I guess we can just sort of chill here, right?"

"I guess we can," said Gem, finally looking over. "That wouldn't leave us with much to do, though, would it?"

"It wouldn't, thank the gods," said Fwhip, rummaging around in his toolbag for something.

All was silent except for the noise of the rain on the leaves. Whatever birds might still be up there were soaked by now. Oh, who was she kidding- anything under this sky would have taken shelter long ago.

Fwhip took a pair of scissors out of his toolbag- why were those in there? -and looked at them as his hand hovered over the opening, running his other hand through his hair, which had grown out long long long during the past few months.

He looked up at the desert man in the mountain rain and back down at the scissors.

"We could get haircuts," he said.

He sat as still as he could while Gem tried her best to brush the tangles out of his hair with naught but her fingers and a wooden comb.

For hours now, his mind had been strangely quiet. He did not trust it. He didn't trust anything, really, so that wasn't new, but the silence was nice.

Gem had declared that she wasn't cutting her hair, but Fwhip declared that he had already made up his mind as soon as he'd ran a hand through his, grimacing for effect. He also had taken one look at Pix's long hair and said that he should go first, he needed it more.

Pix had to agree. It was a rat's nest back there.

Still, he wondered. Wondered a couple things, actually: how he was staying so still, and why the strange unusual peace had taken him so suddenly.

Makes sense, he thought dryly. The desert rat finally gets a little rain and its whole world flings upside down.

But he was no rat, and the world was still the right way up.

Nearby, Fwhip was carving sandals out of ash wood.

He was used to machinery, the quiet uniformity of cutting saws and lathes and their gleaming parts still stained by oil and dust. He was used to the hum and thrum of the parts in his shop, late nights lit by a solitary naked lightbulb hanging by the ceiling, but this would do as well.

He'd seen this style of sandal while visiting the Codlands- two teeth of wood raising the sandals from the ground, making a clack as the residents trod the cobbles. They'd piqued his interest.

"Do you guys wear these in mud, or what?" he'd asked a local shoemaker while walking around, taking note of the position of the borders of the kingdom.

"What?"

"Those sandals," he said, pointing behind them. "They look like they'd be good for keeping your feet dry."

"Oh, no, we don't wear them in mud," said the shopkeep, taking one off of the shelf and putting it on the counter. "They'd stick horribly- you know Mezelean sandals?"

Fwhip nodded, not really understanding.

"These have the same sort of thongs on the front," they continued, angling the top towards him so that he could see. "You'd lose them fast in the swamps."

"I see," said Fwhip. "They do look like they'd stop your feet from getting soaked by puddles, though."

"They do!" said the shopkeep, putting the sandal back on the shelf and looking over their shoulder to look at him. "Would you be interested in buying a pair?"

"Oh, uh, no," said Fwhip, stepping back. "I prefer boots. Just browsing. Thank you, though."

Years later, he was trying his best to carve a memory into a sculpture. Ash wood, file, and sandpaper: 1/3rd of his way through the first sandal by his estimates. Everything should be done by tomorrow at noon. Just enough time for Pix to slip them on, and then they'd be on their way.

Gem was trying her best to patiently coax the tangles out of a long matted rug of hair.

As the rain drummed on, a rhythm that was the absence of rhythm, she did her best with what she had: a trusty wooden comb and her own two hands.

Haircuts were often given in the Grimlands. Long hair was a liability if you worked with machinery, as most of the residents of the kingdom did.

In fact, to have long hair was seen as a mark of status- you obviously didn't work with your hands. Intricate braids and lofty buns were reserved for the nobility. After all, what better way to show your luxury than proving that you didn't have to work a day in your life for it anyways?

As a resident of the Crystal Cliffs- the founder of it, actually, Gem hadn't really bothered with the politics of the other country too much, though there was a lot of overlap between the two. Her hair had been growing out for her entire life, after all, and she staunchly refused to cut it.

She didn't think Pixandria had any traditions regarding hair, not ones that she'd seen anyways. Pix used to keep his hair about neck-length, and had a small copper bead on the end of a small braid hanging in front of both his ears.

That had all gone, of course. Gem didn't blame him. It'd been a while.

"How's it going?" asked Fwhip, who had completed one sandal and was starting on another.

"It's going well," said Gem, focusing on a particularly bratty section of Pixl's locks that were deftly

evading all attempts to be combed out neatly. She let out a huff. "Mostly."

"Don't put the scissors away when you're done," said Fwhip, looking up. "I need mine cut too."

"Short as usual?" asked Gem.

"What kind of question is that? Of course," scoffed Fwhip. "I may not be the Peasant Count of the Grimlands anymore, but I'm sticking to what I got."

Pix turned his slightly to give Fwhip what Gem assumed was a questioning look, and he leaned back against the flank of the sleeping dragon he was resting upon.

"In the Grimlands, hair is sorta a status thing," he explained. "Longer your hair is, the more chance it has of getting caught in something while working. I thought the people who didn't cut their hair were stupid, so I cut it myself when i was 16 with a pair of scissors."

"The court was not happy about that," said Gem, finally brushing out the last snarls.

"Oh, no," said Fwhip with a grin. "The person they'd expected to run everything had just ran away! My sorry ass was next in line to be in charge! They absolutely *hated* me."

"He's very proud of that last bit," said Gem, taking out the silver scissors. "How short do you want your hair cut?"

Pix put his hand up to about his neck, and Gem nodded and carefully started snipping.

Pixl's cloak was still on the other side of the fire, dusty and stained with what might have been blood. She hoped it wasn't blood. (It was probably blood.) His tank top, simple dark brown with a fold in the front going to one side and covering the other, wasn't in much better condition.

Gem had tried not to stare, but she knew Fwhip had been looking too: not at the clothes, but the man under them.

Pixl's arms were about as heavily scarred as one would expect for 8 years living in the desert, but still, they looked like a battlefield. Old callouses crusted over, long scrapes and minor scratches, burn marks, some clear signs of sunburn- what had he seen? What on earth had he gotten into?

Gem desperately wanted to ask, but she knew she couldn't. So she did the only thing she could, and continued snipping away.

The rain pattered overhead. The fire crackled. The three sat there in comfortable silence.

Truth be told, Pix was starting to let himself relax a little bit. He didn't know why, and some part of him didn't like it, but he sat there as still as he could and tried not to flinch as the snip of the scissors passed from the left side of his head to the right.

Did he beat himself up mercilessly for taking a little rest? Yes. He still did not believe he deserved it. But the more he berated himself, the tired he got, the more his shoulders drooped.

Rest is a Herculean sea, navy blue underneath a pitch black sky. It can be breathed like air. Its waves lap at the shore of consciousness, enticing, perfectly cool but never cold.

Rest was the sea on his little sandy island of consciousness, and Pixl was hovering at the shore, uncertain.

"Done," said Gem, sitting back behind him with a satisfied ring to her voice. "Could you turn

around so that I could see?"

Pix looked over his shoulder and was met with the full force of Gem's smile. "Oh, you look a lot better now," she said, clapping her hands. "You almost look like your old self!"

Almost like your old self.

Pix ran a hand through his newly trimmed locks, thinking. No. He definitely was not like his old self at all. He never would be again.

The Copper King was dead in the desert, long picked clean by carrion, his crown torn apart and fought over by crows. Bones bleached white by the fires of the sun.

The vultures were his brothers, and they feasted on what remained of him.

But, he had to give it to Gem: it was nice to not have a dirty brown rug for a head anymore. He gave her a small smile to show his thanks, and she grinned even bigger. That smile kept even as she looked over at her brother.

"Alright," she called over to Fwhip, opening and closing her scissors as a sort of demonstration? show of force? threat? Pix couldn't tell. "Get over here. You look so wrong with long hair."

"Took you long enough," said Fwhip as he scooted over and gave Pix a small grin of his own. "Nice cut you've got there."

Pix nodded and poked at the fire, watching the proceedings of the haircut with interest.

One thing about Fwhip that had stayed consistent throughout the long hard years was that he could not keep still for the life of him. Even as a young Count, fiery and resentful, his fingers were always messing with some sort of little trinket, and now his hands absently spun his chisel as he bantered with his sister, elbowing her and laughing.

Gem had always been the quieter one. Pix remembered her as a cheerful but solitary witch who kept to herself, preferring books to people. Fwhip had mentioned this to him once in passing after a raid on a Pillager outpost, passing a loaf of Pixandrian flatbread back and forth.

"Y'know, I thought she would have opened up a bit by now," he commented, mouth full.

"Yeah?" asked Pix. (Of course, this was back when he still talked.) "Why?"

"Most of the older members of the Grimlands court think she's dead," Fwhip said. He laughed. "Bunch of old buffoons. Even when talking with the Wizardess of the Crystal Cliffs, they don't recognize her at all."

"Why?" asked Pix, surprised. "They're not *that* dense, are they?"

"Well, no, they are," said Fwhip, swallowing. He wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve and continued. "We don't talk about it much, but Gem wasn't always Gem. I mean, she was, but she also wasn't."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean she wasn't always a girl."

"Ohhhh," said Pix with a nod, understanding.

"Yeah," said Fwhip. "Kinda like how I wasn't always a boy. It's kind of funny- the court didn't want a *girl* ruling, god forbid, but then I got it all figured out and told them to get with the program and suddenly this is way worse." He sighed. "We switched roles, I guess."

"That's got to be difficult," said Pix, staring out over the plains. "Unique set of challenges, y'know?"

"For sure," agreed Fwhip. "We got it all figured out in the end, though." He grinned. "Mostly because I booted all of the bigots out of there."

"Nice," said Pix.

"Enough small talk, though," said Fwhip, standing up and going back down the steps. "Last one down the steps is a chicken egg!"

"Give me those," said Fwhip now, snatching the scissors from Gem and breaking Pix out of his reverie. "I'm not going to have those stupid long dangly bits in front of my face."

"They'd look cute on you!" protested Gem.

"They would get in my face," said Fwhip. "So much."

"But they'd look so good."

"In another world, maybe," said Fwhip, snipping them off indignantly as Gem sulked.

Idiots, Pix thought affectionately.

(Above his little sandy island, a sliver of sun poked through.)

That night, Pix quietly took a leather-bound and unfathomably weathered but still intact book from one of the packs, the one they used the least often. He'd discovered this in the old chapel on the mountain.

The title was in Pixandrian. He'd recognized that much, but couldn't bear to look at it any longer than that when he'd first picked it up. He was still hesitant to read it, but his curiosity had gotten the best of him. He went over to the fireside and sat down.

In the low light of the flames, sparsely lighting up the flaking gilt that made the title: *Ororūnmè i L'thine*.

(Translator's note: Ororūnmè was a nickname given to Pix by his people after he left to wander. It translates to "The Old Man of the Desert," not because he was actually very old, but because he looked like it. Despite being only 31 or 32 at the time he left, his people used to say he looked hundreds of years older than that. The full title translates to "Before the Old Man of the Desert.")

Pix had to put the book down.

He had no idea how the book had made it that far out, nor whom it was carried by. Was it a resident of the kingdom- even now, he shied away from calling the kingdom his- or someone else who bought the book or possibly looted it for the gilt on the cover?

Either way, he dared not open it. Not yet. He knew exactly what the Pixandrians had thought of him after he left. He did not want to read that particular condemnation, not now, not this late at night, possibly not ever.

He put the book back into its pack gently. The rain had slowed down a little by now, but the stars were still not visible and lightning still crackled lazily in the air to the east.

He'd known the storms once. That was another time, though, another epoch. Another man.

Pixl went back to bed.

"So," said Fwhip the next morning while working on the second sandal. He was almost done with the set up to the thongs on the front. He'd completely eyeballed the measurements. God forbid the shoes didn't fit.

"So," said Gem, spinning a bit of meat over the fire. The rain was back full force, and it was coming down hard enough to occasionally pierce through the field now to land in the fire and cause it to hiss and flicker wildly.

"People usually tell stories around a campfire, right?"

"Yes," said Gem, continuing to roast the bit of steak she had going. "Do you have one?"

"Well, since I'm busy working on this, I figured you could tell it," said Fwhip, aggressively sanding.

"What are we even talking about?" asked Gem, amused. "You can't just tell a story without knowing what it is."

"It's easier than it looks," said Fwhip with a shrug. "I was talking about the Rapture."

"Oh," said Gem. She was quiet for a moment. "That's a sad story. Why do we have to tell it now?"

"Because Pix doesn't know," said Fwhip. "Sometimes the sad stories are, well, sad, but sometimes you have to hear them in order to go on. Or whatever."

"Very well spoken of you," said Gem.

"I'm a guy of my words," said Fwhip, putting four fingers to his chest. "As in, I like words, and words are fun, and I never ever lie. Well, okay, I do lie. Rarely."

"Forget what I said," said Gem with a sigh. "And we don't know if Pix even wants to hear this?"

Pix nodded very solemnly.

"Okay, then," said Gem, leaning back.

"The Rapture. Xornoth came back. We've already talked about how Fwhip basically exploded everything, but that sent a chain reactions of events that let the demon loose."

(Fwhip stayed uncharacteristically quiet on his side of the fire. Pix looked at him. He did not look up.)

"And I know you didn't have the best relations with Sausage," she continued with a sigh, "but... we went and looked for him and he wasn't there.

"As for the rest of the rulers, they had either fled or were dying. Shelby took her wolves and left, Katherine alongside her. Don't know what happened to Pearl or Joel. The whole ocean dried up, so we went ahead and assumed that Lizzie was gone." She took a deep breath and continued.

"The worst bit was, when we went back and checked Rivendell, Scott was lying there in a pool of his own blood next to his brother. I don't know how it worked, but, it looks like he sacrificed himself to try and save everyone else."

The rain was deafeningly loud. Fwhip threaded a string through a hole he'd cut in the sandals.

"You forgot to mention Jimmy," he said quietly, "but... he went in the explosion. I tried to carry him out, but he didn't last very long." He exhaled and looked up. "I'm sorry."

Pix, whose shoulders had been drooped and head had been bent as each name was added to the count, finally looked up, eyes bright. He nodded once, slowly.

"That was a lot to drop on you out of nowhere," continued Fwhip, speaking faster. "That was really heavy. And I don't know if you expected any of that, or if you wanted to-"

"It's okay," said Gem, looking over the fire at him. "I promise it's okay." Pix nodded again.

"Your sandals are done," said Fwhip, shoving them towards him. "They're a style I copied from the Codlands." He stood up. "We're leaving in an hour, right?"

"Right," said Gem.

"Well then, I'm going to go stand moodily in the rain or something," said Fwhip, leaving the force field. Gem couldn't hear him too clearly after that, but she swore she could hear him let out a shaky breath as he walked out.

"Might as well get packed, then," she said to nobody in particular. Pix gave her a strange look that might have been pity, but neither of them spoke.

They left as soon as the clouds dissipated.

Over his shoulder, Pix could see the ruins of what was: a tall obsidian spire, several large areas of flattened grass courtesy of the dragons, and the smoldering ashes of a campfire.

Back west it was, then.

Chapter End Notes

All credit goes to whimsicaltwine (tumblr and ao3 username) for the headcanon of how the Grimlands view hair and why Fwhip cut his. She's helped me brainstorm a lot of these ideas in the GC we have for this work on discord!

yes, i actually researched indian and japanese geta for this fic. yes, it's barely relevant to the plot. this is why i have ~40 people subscribed to this fic its because i put my whole back into the quality of it!!! y'all are WELCOME!

Also- forgot to put this here when originally writing the chapter notes, but if you see some of the wording being switched around or some parts being given minor edits, don't worry about it! I usually go back through after posting and fix things up to a few days after the fact before starting the next chapter. :]

eden & the songbird

Chapter Summary

Two weeks later, they touch down in a small bit of land miraculously untouched by the demon's blight.

Or,

The landscape is not the only thing to flourish in this place.

Chapter Notes

hello everyone! this chapter is a very important one to me. i've been waiting to finally start writing it for literal months now, and i think y'all are gonna like it. i've seen some of y'all predicting what might happen here in the comments and in my askbox, and while they're fun to read, they're not exactly right.

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They traveled for two weeks as nomads, wayfarers of the forgotten past: touching down in arcane and lone places for no more than one night, the shadows of the dragons haunting the landscape like ghosts.

Two weeks is not a very easy length of time to explain concisely, especially when it's mainly spent following the same familiar routine, comfortably worn like old leather, soft and supple. A week can be easily fit into a little rectangle and a quick summary: Sunday, they rested. Monday came the sun.

But a fortnight is not so easily contained. As times go, it is one of the most difficult to capture in a single snapshot as one must with words. It takes the shape of a bird.

(Time is very much a shapeshifter; have you not seen him for yourself? Of course you haven't. He's everywhere.)

Thus, instead of dragging out the details of a long and grey two weeks spent between storm and shadow, I will collect for you a couple of scenes that caught my eye whilst I was searching for hopes to describe.

(A story, however brief, is made up of hopes. Without it, it's just a news report, and I'm not here for politics. God knows I'd do horribly as a journalist. I'm far too empathetic for the job.)

On the second day of their first week out, they landed on the outskirts of the foothills of the mountains. Ravines scarred the earth in deep abysses laced with razor's edges, and the land that remained was strewn about with gravel and seemed unable to bear any life.

It was a grim place, and utterly silent, so that the three travelers were on edge constantly. Even the dragons appeared to be uneasy, shifting around and spouting flame occasionally as if something was there.

"It's like it's holding it's breath," said Gem quietly as they unpacked. "There's not even any mobs around."

"Don't jinx it," said Fwhip. "You know how these things go."

"Fair," said Gem, shaking out the bedroll. Fwhip had to restrain himself from flinching every time a noise was made. It was like the place was holding its breath.

Not even the wind dared make a noise in that rocky plain. If the air had been a quarter of a degree warmer, it would have been suffocating.

Fwhip looked up at the sound of rocks skittering over the edge of a gorge to see a zombie staring right at them from across the maw of it, and another on the same side ambling slowly towards them to join it.

"You jinxed it," he hissed.

"Just my..." said Gem, trailing off.

Fwhip didn't understand why until he saw her staring right at Pix, who was staring the zombies down, fist white on a section of his cloak. Behind him, Odysseus the dragon growled.

(If this was a movie, the score would be quieting down right about now to indicate that something was wrong.)

"Pixl?" he called, voice filled with a fear that he was only half aware had gripped him suddenly. Pix did not turn around.

"Pix, buddy, what's going on?" he asked, trying to sound casual, getting up and walking a little closer. "It's just zombies. They can't get to us. Come on."

Pix did not move. The wind did not move. Fwhip's heart did not move.

For all of one second, Fwhip was concerned- no, absolutely *convinced*- that his friend was going to try and make the jump alone over the gorge to fight off the zombies; inevitably failing the jump and making his grave the gods knew how far below.

They had lost him once. He could not bear to lose him again.

With a low roar, Odysseus broke the silence in one fell swoop and shot the zombies with a column of fire, illuminating them for all of three seconds: bones cracking, flesh burning, eye sockets and gaping maws lit from the inside by the flames.

Well, thought Fwhip faintly, there's *that problem solved*.

Pixl finally stepped back, hand loosening its grip on his cloak, and Fwhip walked up next to him and gently clapped him on the back.

"We'll be out of here by tomorrow," he said, trying to sound cheerful despite the quaver in his voice. "We'll get some sleep, and then we'll be out of here, okay?"

Pix nodded, gently shook himself loose, and walked back towards the fire. Fwhip couldn't see his

expression, and when he got back to the fire he had already gone to bed.

"What the fuck was that about?" he whispered to Gem. She just shrugged.

"Whatever it was," she said quietly with a glance over her shoulder at the sleeping man and the fire, "I think we might need to try just a little bit harder to avoid a repeat of that bear attack."

On the fifth day of the second week, they found themselves in a recently burnt forest, choked with dust and ash and littered with cracked and misshapen stumps that had once been trees. Clouds which had been tailing them for the past three or so days finally caught up with them, and so the three ate their meals as the rain fell.

"I thought we'd finally gotten rid of the rain," Fwhip grumbled, chewing on some meat.

"Well, clouds don't really follow human rules or wants," said Gem, eating a chunk of bread. She swallowed and continued on. "We're lucky to have remained dry for as long as we did."

"Can't even drink it," said Fwhip. "Too much fuckin' dust everywhere." He took a resentful sip of water.

Meanwhile Pix, even after all this time, still ate slowly and with little bites, like he was worried the food would take offense if he ate it too quickly. Still looked at everything with the same slow patient questioning gaze.

The food wouldn't mind if it was eaten fast or not, really, but seven months on, Fwhip and Gem had started to understand his little movements like one would with a familiar horse or dog, although it pained him to liken an entire human being to something as simple as a beast.

As scarce as the difference may have been, though, the truth was that this was a man who was still noticeably different from the shell-shocked husk that Fwhip had taken for a brainless undead that first night in the desert, even at his worst.

Pix was still haunted, that was for sure, but now he reminded one more of a haunted man than a haunted ghost.

(Can a ghost be haunted? Yes. Yes. If a thing- a place, a person, a story- has ever lost something that once made it feel very grand, it has been haunted and may as well be for the rest of forever, however long that is.)

(Pix was a special kind of ghost. He had been denied at separate points both life and death. He missed both, despite having never quite been that specific flavor of dead before. More on that later.)

Fwhip knew that Gem noticed the difference too. She'd look at him with his newly trimmed haircut and still-battered but freshly washed cloak (they'd hung it in the rain on the mountain and left it to dry next to the fire afterwards) and get a slightly faraway look on her face, like she was remembering what had been.

What could have been. What they had lost.

Even before his exeunt, Pix had always carried with him an air of quiet mourning, but that was probably just due to what he'd dedicated his time to preserving. It was like his time spent alone in the open desert had frozen him or cauterized some wound the two could not see, but there was a man beneath the creature and its worn and battered exoskeleton that could now be glimpsed most days, however briefly.

Very slowly, he was thawing.

It was progress. Slow progress, but still progress.

"I will say, you've gotten better at cooking," Gem announced now, taking a bite of her steak. "This no longer tastes like cow feces."

"Wait, it ever did?" asked Fwhip, genuinely surprised.

"Yes," said Gem primly, taking another bite. "Now it just tastes like dry steak."

"There's no way," said Fwhip.

"Ask Pix," said Gem, tilting her head towards the Pix in question. Pix waved his hand away from her in a shoving motion, indicating that this wasn't his fight.

"Come on," pleaded Fwhip. "I'm not that bad at cooking!"

"Oh, so that one time you set the kitchens on fire doesn't count?" asked Gem.

"I was *five*, Gem."

"And then you did it again at seventeen."

"Better than you blowing your bedroom wall out when you were studying to become a witch and woke up half the castle, including me!"

"It worked," said Gem. "I got out."

"Yes, and then I was the one who had to fix the wall."

Pix looked between the two of them as the argument progressed with a hint of a smile on his lips like he was watching a tennis tournament. "Don't look at me like that," said Fwhip, slightly desperate. "It doesn't taste that bad, does it?"

Pix shrugged.

Gem laughed into the sky, returning her face back down to earth quickly to try and gain her composure, still smiling. "I'm starting to think that part of the reason that Pix is mute is just so he can watch us argue without having to get involved."

Pix shrugged again, but this time he was definitely smiling as well.

"What you *should* be saying," said Fwhip loftily, ignoring the past minute entirely and taking a bite of steak, "is 'thank you, Chef Fwhip for this lovely and filling food.'"

"I wouldn't say it was *lovely*, but sure," said Gem.

"Say the words, Gem."

"What words?" asked Gem innocently.

"I'm gonna toss your steak into the fire and then you won't have dinner this evening," he threatened.

"I'll just steal yours," replied Gem, far too nonchalantly.

"What, my *dry horrible steak*? What has the world come to?" asked Fwhip with as much sarcasm as he could possibly muster.

"Food is food," said Gem. "No matter how it tastes."

"Shut up," said Fwhip, sticking a fork into the last portion of his meat. It *was* a little tough, but he wasn't going to be cooking five star meals in the middle of the godsdamned wilderness, for fuck's sake!

His annoyance must have carried over to his face, because on the other side of the fire, Gem laughed under her breath as she sipped her water. Fwhip decided to ignore it. The soot-and-ashes-stained rain ambled slowly down to earth.

Exactly two weeks after finding the mountain, the three travelers and their dragons were flying low over the land to find a good place to rest for a few days, maybe more. Wild, stick-thin sheep fled underneath the shadow of the dragons, and Fwhip had to keep a solid hand on the reins to stop Odysseus from dipping down every few seconds to feed.

It was late morning over a stretch of flat, blue-grey fields. The early spring sun shone above, adding a little heat to the slightly dry air, and had the trio stood on the ground, Fwhip knew by instinct that the temperature would be just right.

So far, though, they could find nowhere to land- the grass was too tall, and they didn't want to risk starting any fires.

At this point, after at least two hours of scouting for a safe haven to land in, Fwhip was considering telling Gem to just turn back and continue in another direction before a flash of emerald green right below a dip in the ground caught his eye.

Catching her eye and waving her and Hyacinth over, Fwhip banked the dragon towards the ground and into the... crevice?

"Holy *shit*," he said, dismounting.

To his eyes, they'd flown right into a small corner of Heaven.

The grass above, grey and reflecting the clouded sky above, had absolutely nothing on the foliage and flowers in the dip that were emerald green in comparison. On one end, the ground sloped gently down with a stream running gently through the middle. A small bank on the other end was cut off abruptly by a towering cliff about the height of the top of the other end of the plain.

The crevice was long, and had many places to shelter under, and although the foliage in it would not stand against a garden during the world's golden years, those times had sadly passed.

"Whoa," said Gem, walking up next to him. "I haven't seen something this pretty since..."

Since Sausage dissapeared, Fwhip thought.

"Forever," Fwhip said.

"Yeah," said Gem.

"There's so many plants here," he said, walking forwards and looking in all directions- up, down, left, at the stream nearby which technically wasn't a direction but it counted because it was pretty.

"Holy shit, is that ginger root?"

"I think so," said Gem, kneeling and swinging her bag around to check. "Well, at least we know what to do now if one of us has a stomachache."

While all that was going on, Pix was walking across the soft grass in his freshly hewn sandals, taking it all in.

How sweet the air smelled. How bright the flowers were.

"It's nice, isn't it?" asked Fwhip, coming up behind him, arms full of various leaves. "I think this grass might actually be softer than our bedrolls. I'll have to try that later."

"You know all of the important plants, right?" asked Gem, walking up behind him, also holding leaves and various roots.

"Yeah, why?"

"I've been collecting this by myself for months," said Gem, shoving her batch into his arms. "It's your turn. Don't kill us." Fwhip opened his mouth to say something, but shut it again at a dagger-eyed glare from his sister and stomped off with a huff.

"I'm sorry about not talking to you as much lately," said Gem, walking up next to him. Pix nodded, and she continued. "It's not your fault, I promise, I've just been researching a lot of things so that we can finally get out of here."

She'd stayed up late most nights. He'd seen her. He couldn't sleep either, but for far different reasons.

"I think this might be the last place in the entire world untouched by Xornoth," she said, looking around. "It's just like spring in the Crystal Cliffs."

Pix waited for her to continue, but she did not, so the two of them just stood there and looked out over the river and Fwhip needling his way through the foliage until Gem sat down and he followed suit.

(It was peaceful there. He quite liked it.)

Dinner that night was a strangely cheerful affair, with Gem cracking jokes and Fwhip laughing more than he usually did. He was right, thought Pix, the grass *was* softer than their beds.

"So," said Fwhip, slamming back a most likely negligible amount of water as one would usually do with alcohol. "Nice place I stumbled upon here, yeah?"

"Yep," said Gem, flat on her back and staring at the stars. "Nice indeed."

"Honestly, I'd be fine to live here the rest of my life," continued Fwhip. He paused a bit. "Not like it'd be very interesting, you know."

"Me too," sighed Gem. "I'm sick of running." She paused as well. "It'd be nice to settle in one place for a bit. Don't you realize that 'interesting' has been our life for the past 8 months, Fwhip? I'd be fine with some peace."

Pix nodded and set down his cup. It would indeed be nice. But right now, and for the past few right nows he'd been aware of, the only peace he could imagine himself ever experiencing would be

when his bones were in the earth.

Even then, that wasn't the end of it, though, was it? Eventually they'd decay into calcium and get digested by the worms into new soil and grow into a tree that would grow into a forest and then in some way he would be the forest and he would be forever and if any other humans besides the three that were probably the only ones left ever had children then he would be part of humanity again and then the cycle would start all over again. There was no escaping it, really. No peace there. And if there was no peace in death, then there was no peace anywhere.

How many bones were in the making of me, then? he thought, and suddenly the night was just a fraction colder.

Fwhip continued talking on the other side of the fire, blissfully unaware of the horrifying revelation Pix had just had. "Well, either way," he shrugged, "I'mma live, and I'mma have one hell of a story to tell my kids someday."

"Didn't you swear to never have kids ever?" asked Gem, still flat on her back.

"I meant biologically, Gem. Adoption exists."

"You could also just steal the children."

"True that!"

Idiots, Pix thought again, but somehow gentler this time.

Their conversation was interrupted by Odysseus waking from sleep suddenly and walking a couple cautious steps towards a nearby cluster of trees and undergrowth, growling quietly. Something rustled in the leaves beyond.

Fwhip stood up with a sigh. "May as well go ahead and check that out," he said. "Probably a zombie or something."

"Alright," said Gem, sitting up. "Don't go alone. Do you mind if I keep watch over the fire?"

Fwhip looked over at Pix, who shrugged and got up, so they ~~cautiously approached~~ walked towards the suspicious clump of leaves.

"I really do not want to go in there," said Fwhip. He didn't blame himself. It was dark, after all, and there was probably a creature somewhere in there. Usually he wouldn't have minded, but it had been a while since he had fought in the dark.

Also, dying to a zombie in the full darkness while fully armed would be a stupid way to die.

Pix looked at him then tilted his head towards the thicket and walked in first, Fwhip following close behind, sword clenched tightly in one hand.

It was annoying in the way that tree roots in pitch black darkness tended to be annoying. Fwhip stubbed his toe every fifteen seconds, and he could not fathom how Pix was faring in his open-toed sandals.

The two were about fifteen seconds of trying to not trip over random tree roots in the dark when Fwhip heard a low, guttural groan and saw the vague shape of a zombie a few feet ahead of him.

It couldn't see him, since he was behind a tree, but it was ambling steadily towards Pix, who did

not move.

"Pix," he whispered. "Get behind me. I've got it."

Pix did not move.

"*Pix*," he hissed. Just as he was about to shove him aside and kill the thing himself, the zombie swung and hit Pixl in the stomach.

He sank, and Fwhip swung, cutting the zombie's head clean off in one swipe. He kicked it and the body clumsily to the side as he knelt in front of Pix, frustrated but also the littlest bit scared.

"What were you thinking?" he whispered, annoyance leeching through into his voice. "Why didn't you run? I could have killed it easy. Are you hurt?"

Pix looked up. "They used to just ignore me," he replied quietly, somehow disbelievingly, head drooping to the ground again.

(There he is.)

Fwhip was too shocked to register the response or the enormity of what the fuck had just happened, so he did the only thing he could think to do and blandly repeated his previous question. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, Fwhip," said Pix, sounding ever so slightly annoyed and infinitely weary. He sighed. "I just didn't expect it to hit me."

"Okay," said Fwhip, resisting the urge to wipe away the tears that had suddenly appeared on his face. He swallowed. "Okay. Let's get out of here."

The two stood up and picked their way back out of the forest, Fwhip leading this time, numb to the ticking seconds until he faced the memory again.

"Are you going back to bed?" he heard himself ask over the ringing in his ears. His eyes saw Pix nod, and his legs stumbled back over and his arms cast his sword carelessly on the ground next to him and he sat down and just stared into the flames.

"What was it?" asked Gem, concerned.

Fwhip could only speak in single words. "Zombie."

"Did you get it?"

"Yeah."

"Did anyone get hurt? What's wrong?"

He looked up, directly at her, voice breaking. "Gem, he talked."

Three seconds of stunned silence, then she spoke. "*What?*"

"He got punched by a zombie," said Fwhip, composure finally unraveling, "and- and I asked him why he hadn't ran, and he said something about the zombies just ignoring him before? I don't know. I don't know."

The tears were coming faster now, and he took a shaky breath as he wiped them from his face.

Come on, he thought to himself. Get it together. You're a grown ass man.

"What did he sound like?" asked Gem softly.

"Like someone who hadn't talked in almost nine fucking years, Gem," said Fwhip with a short laugh, still on the verge of hysteria. "No. No, really though, he still had the same accent and everything, same voice. It's still him."

The two were silent a little longer, Fwhip trying his best to breathe through the quiet hiccuping sobs, and Gem came over and sat down next to him.

He leaned into her, still crying heavily into her shoulder and probably completely ruining her cloak, and she put her arms around him, rubbing his back in soothing circles.

"He sounded so tired," said Fwhip thickly. "Like he hadn't slept in years."

"He does take the night watch a lot," said Gem.

Fwhip laughed, as much as he could laugh while still breaking down. "I'm gonna walk up to him tomorrow, and I'm gonna say hey dude, you're not allowed to do that anymore, and if he says no then we're both gonna veto him."

"Mhm," said Gem. "Was he hurt?"

"Yes, well- i mean, I *guess*," said Fwhip. "He said he was, but I think he might not be. You know how he is."

"I do," said Gem. "How about you go off to bed, and I'll get another log on the fire and check on him later."

"Okay," said Fwhip, sitting up and wiping his nose. "Gods. Thank you, Gem."

"Of course," said Gem. She watched him go and flop down next to the dragons, but instead of feeding the fire immediately like she promised she instead carefully stepped over Hyacinth's tail and walked over to Pix, curled up on the grass, half-in and half-out of a blanket.

She went to draw it over him but paused when he stirred, then sat up.

"I didn't mean to wake you up," said Gem quietly, sitting down. "I was just coming over to check on you. Fwhip told me you got hit earlier, is everything okay?"

Pix nodded then stopped with a deep sigh. "Yeah. I'm alright." He rubbed his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" asked Gem gently. Fwhip was right. Underneath the fatigue and the roughness of his voice, it was still undoubtedly Pix, and she took comfort in that.

"Nevermind," he said with a sigh, and Gem leaned forwards to give him a hug as well.

Somehow, within the past ten minutes, Gem had found herself holding possibly her last friends in the world. Somehow, though, she didn't mind.

She could feel Pix relax a bit, exhaling as he sat forwards and hugged her back, and she smiled to herself in the dark where no one could see.

"Welcome back," she said.

He hugged her tight a final time, sat up and gave her a small smile, and flopped back onto the grass.

Still smiling, Gem walked back over to the fire and put another log on, flopping back and staring up into the stars in the night sky.

Chapter End Notes

gem really said "if you don't want to have your own kids, shoplifted is fine"

anyways how are we feeling about this one folks

apologies for the quality i wrote the last third of this at 6am

Mirages

Chapter Summary

Some important matters are attended to.

Or,

The three of them get baths, mend their clothes, and continue west.

Chapter Notes

makes a peace sign with one hand as i lay faceup on the floor. I'm somehow still alive
y'all let's goooooooooo lmao i finished this chapter at almost 12am sorry for any mistakes
near the end

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He dreamt that he was in the desert again.

The sun beat down on him from above, the sand scorching his feet from below. He knew that if he did not find shade soon, he would die.

At this point, Pix was extremely aware of but not yet resigned to the fact that he had been denied death, so he went and started in a random direction. It didn't matter which one. He'd always somehow find shelter.

Half-blinded by the worst of the light reflecting off of the dunes, he trudged towards the nearest hint of cliff in the distance. If he could just make it before the sun hit its zenith, he'd be able to pass out there for the gods knew how long.

Why? He knew not. He was barely aware of what he knew anymore. Everything was blurring together. Time was a memory. At this point, he could have been out here for anywhere from three days to an eternity.

It would have made no difference, anyways. If there was a hell, he'd found it and was stuck in it.

A whooshing from behind interrupted his thoughts, and he turned his bleary eyes behind him to see a monolithic wall of sand and dust and grit racing straight for him. There was no time for shelter, no time to even spread his arms to accept his death as it came.

He'd suffocate here, making no final stand, not even uttering one noise. This was his end: alone. Alone. Alone. A L O N E

The last thing he remembered feeling was like his soul was being blasted from his body one atom at a time.

Pix sat up with a panicked gasp like one who had surfaced after drowning, one hand clutching his chest.

It was night, or maybe early morning. His borrowed blanket was still wrapped around his legs. He was sitting on grass. One of the dragons snored peacefully nearby.

There was no sand, no desert, and no sun. He was ~~safe free out dead~~ sitting on the grass in the predawn.

Slowly, he rubbed his eyes and sighed, letting his head rest in his hands. He was fine: he should just go back to sleep.

Next to him, Fwhip stirred and sat up with a yawn, bleary eyes closed. "You good?" he asked sleepily, rubbing his eyes.

Pix sat up a little more and nodded tiredly.

"Nightmares again?"

Nod.

"Need a hug, or...?"

Shake.

"Alright, then," said Fwhip, lying back down. "G'night."

Pixl waited a little bit before lying back down as well, arms behind head, staring at the stars, trying to steady his breathing. The stars were the same as he remembered them being, and he traced their patterns with his eyes: the Sickle, the Whelk, the Desertflower. All with their own stories and histories.

His nightmares never had any stars in them, only the blistering sun. That was there. This was here. This was real.

During his wandering years, he'd navigated by those same constellations, hung in the air like benevolent angels spinning diamond-studded stories with their glowing lyres. Miles later, it gave him at least a scant comfort to know that they were still there, still the same.

No matter how the earth had been contorted, the sky was still the same at least. The demon could not touch that same simple beauty.

He knew those constellation stories, having spent his entire adult life with them. If he was quiet enough, maybe he could hear them whispering to him now, hear the music of the spheres roll faintly from the sky...

Next to him, Fwhip rolled over towards him, then away, then towards again. Tossed around in his own half-asleep tempest, he rolled around like a muddy pig before finally sitting up with an exasperated sigh and kicking his blankets off.

(Nevermind, then.)

"I'm going to hate myself for this later," Fwhip said in a low voice, half-crawling over towards the packs, "but I have a set of spare clothes in here somewhere. That little brook has a couple of deep holes at the end of it that would be good to take a bath in and I am well aware that I smell like a

horse." (He was right. He did.)

"Is it going to be cold?" he continued, rummaging through his pack. "Yes. Are there probably snakes in there? Also yes. Am I doing this anyways? Yes. Where was I going with this? No idea."

He stood up with several lumps of fabric in his arms that Pixl assumed were all spare clothes. "If Gem asks where I'm at, tell her I'm taking a bath in the river." Short pause. "Or, just point in that general direction," he added awkwardly. "Whichever you're more comfortable with."

Pix stayed silent as he watched him go, picking his way over stones and cursing as he stepped on various sharp objects. He hadn't put boots on. Fwhip was right, he *did* smell like a horse. Maybe a short soak would help.

Slowly in the east, a small light slowly grew: the lantern of the sun slowly being kindled by the light of the stars.

The light was slow and patient and did not care to go any faster. Why would it? The sun had a job to fulfill, and it did it as best as it ever would; until time ran out or until Time imploded.

(Awaken, ye eldest, and fix your unblinking eyes upon your prophet laden with earth's burdens.)

Pix continued sitting there, feeling the morning breeze finally stir faintly amongst the hollow they were encamped in. He told his galloping thoughts to quiet down and *look*, goddamn it.

Miraculously, they listened, if only for a little bit. It was strangely quiet here in this small bubble of peace. The air smelled of dewy grass, the sort you only get at specific times of day in very early spring when things are beginning to live again.

It was nice.

As soon as the first fraction of the sun had risen over the long and ravished prairies, though, Gem was awake, and with her rising Pixl's little moment fell away and the world was back to being horribly scary again.

(Gem woke with the sun most days. She had for years.)

(She had always been early to bed, earliest to rise. Some joked that she worshipped the sun. That would be relevant later, but the timeframe of that later is not within the scope of this tale.)

She nodded at Pix in acknowledgement as she bustled around (when had she stood up? he must have drifted off), flapping clothes, hands on her hips as she looked at the light in the sky. "I think I might get some laundry done today. I have some spare clothes."

Pix nodded, even though she could not see.

"Would you like to help?" she asked. "I know you didn't bring any spare clothes with you, but I did, and so did Fwhip. Speaking of- oh, where is that man?"

He was at an impasse here. He could either point towards the river and not say anything, but she wasn't turned towards him and probably expected him to talk, but if he talked and if she didn't expect it would that be too jarring? Would pointing be enough? Would just saying anything without pointing be too vague, or what?

Somewhere in his brain, a bunch of wires crossed, anxiety flowing through them. He had to do something fast, or else Gem's question would go unanswered and he'd be less than useless. She

turned around to look for her brother, nose scrunched, and Pixl's brain went ahead and made the decision for him.

"River," Pix said, pointing at the river.

Gods damn it.

"Thank you," said Gem, apparently oblivious to his blunder and smiling at him. "Did he say when he'd get back yet, or...?"

Pix shook his head.

"I'm taking a bath, Gem," shouted Fwhip's voice from a decent distance away. "I dropped the soap into the bottom of the river. I'll be back as soon as I get it."

"Dropped the soap...?" asked Gem, clearly concerned. Pix just shrugged.

"He didn't even wait for me to heat up the water a little," sighed Gem. "Well, either way, he has the right idea. I might get some of our laundry done today. I have a set of spare clothes and I think Fwhip does too. We could get you set up with a blanket, maybe?"

"No need," said Pix quickly, then clamping his mouth shut as soon as the words left his mouth. What had come over him?

As Gem walked off to get what Pix assumed was soap, he looked down at his scarred and calloused hands as if expecting an answer to be etched there.

Ever since that first sentence had dropped from his mouth like a single droplet of water, the dam seemed to have bursted- the truth would come out with it soon and break down the walls he'd so carefully built around himself.

The truth was a powerful thing, a thing that rent and torn, louder than silence, quieter than a supernova in the deep blacks and rich blues of space where no breaths blew. He feared it, and what it would do. What it could do.

For if his two companions ever figured out that he'd gone into exile and doom and rot and the infinite unrelenting heat of the desert by his own choice, they would shun him. (Not that he wasn't used to being shunned. But after months of being amongst the living again, the idea gripped him cold like the threat of death never could.)

For who would reach out a hand to save a man who was six feet deep in a grave he'd willingly dug himself?

Gem, meanwhile, was walking over to the river just in time for Fwhip to walk over in a pair of beige cargo shorts and a hastily buttoned white short sleeved button-up.

"You look like a divorced lesbian dad," said Gem.

"Thanks," said Fwhip. "You look like a fucking wizard."

"Thank you!" said Gem cheerily.

Fwhip sighed as she breezed past him, giggling. He was most definitely not a lesbian. Or a dad. Or divorced. This was just the spare things he brought.

Whatever. Since everyone was intent on doing laundry today, he figured he might as well try and attend to some important matters. Namely, trying to fix his stupid *fucking* boots.

They'd been threatening to fall apart for ages now, and he'd just ignored it, like an idiot. He'd tended to just buy new pairs back home when they broke or wore out, but since home didn't exist anymore for him, or at least not like it used to, he guessed he had to do it himself.

He sighed as he dragged his toolbag out from the pile of bags they had lying around, rifling through it. Chisel, needle and thread, hand stamp, but precious little leatherworking tools, which was extremely annoying when your boots were literally falling apart and had to be stitched back together.

Fwhip was no master craftsman, but he fancied himself able to do at least some basic repairing tasks and some more detailed work when dealing with metal. But this wasn't metal.

With an annoyed groan, he set the bag down with a dramatic thump onto the ground and flopped backwards onto the ground, glaring at the sky. Stupid. All of it stupid. In his peripheral vision, he saw Pix stick a thumb through a hole in his cloak.

"Shoemakers make it look so easy," he complained to nobody in particular. "You get the stupid shoe sole then you get the stupid leather and you bend it around and then you sew it together and make a bunch of buckles and then boom, shoes.

"You'd *think*," he said, sitting up and leaning forwards onto his bent knees, "I'd be able to do it. But no. How did they get a *needle* through goddamn *wood*?"

There was a short pause as he glared at the ground.

"I haven't even started trying to fix it," he grumbled, and set to work on the boots.

It was hard work, and very difficult. The leather of the boot itself had pulled up from the sole, and Fwhip would have considered saving himself a lot of pain and just nailing it back into the sole if it wouldn't have definitely fucked up his feet.

So, he went for the simplest and fastest option: Glue.

"Whatcha up to?" asked Gem, resplendent in a purple sweater and blue jeans, walking back over with a load of laundry in her arms.

"Glueing my shoes back together," said Fwhip, busy glueing his shoes back together.

"That probably won't last for very long," said Gem.

"Oh, of course," said Fwhip. "Let me just walk over to this cobbler's and hand these over within the week. Silly me."

Gem was silent, silent as the moon.

In between the grasses, dewdrops spun webs of light: a spring rain from the Earth. Fwhip, acutely aware of his mistake, looked anywhere but up: the boots in his hands, the weatherstained grass below, his hands themselves.

"I'm sorry," he said, and above him, Gem sighed and sat down next to him. Fwhip expected her to say something, but she did not.

Even with the near-silent hush of the wind, you could hear the tension in the air from a quarter mile away. (Pix sure did, but he didn't interfere.) Fwhip picked his boots back up and continued gluing them back together.

"You know, this is still really hard for everyone without you bringing up what happened every three seconds," said Gem quietly.

"It is," said Fwhip, picking and choosing his next words like fresh apples from the tree he used to climb as a kid. Gem would always yell at him to get down from there, he'd fall and break something.

She had always been the cautious one.

"Why are you so cynical?" she asked now with a sigh. "I'm just trying to keep the three of us afloat. We're working on limited rations, the dragons are having a harder time finding food, the earth is crumbling beneath our very feet- not to mention that we all have our own things to deal with."

Fwhip took a deep breath, trying to steady the anger that came from hearing her accusation. "You-" he started, then paused. "Listen. I'm not being cynical. I just remember the past. It ties into why we're here. You can't really live in the present without mentioning where you came from every once in a while."

"And yet here you are, joking about it," said Gem. "It really feels like you're making light of it like this, you know."

"Have you even been listening?" asked Fwhip incredulously. He gestured around him. "My home was literally destroyed in part by my own hand, Gem. That's part of why we're here now. Do you actually think that I could trivialize that?"

"All I'm saying," said Gem, "is that some things need to be taken seriously. You can stick with the past, but it's time to look forwards."

Ignoring the several issues he found within that sentence, Fwhip just let out an annoyed sigh and focused all of his effort on the boots he was repairing. "Bold words from a girl who ran from home and left me to fend for myself when shit hit the fan," he muttered.

Gem got up with all of the force and grief of a girl forced to face a raging forest fire alone and walked off with a stride that could halt a god in its tracks.

"Fuck," muttered Fwhip. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

"I'm sorry!" he yelled over to where she was walking off, but she did not stop nor turn around.

With an annoyed groan, he set the boots down carefully right-side up to dry and stood up to stretch and look around. It was a warm but windy day, expected as usual, and the hearth lay cold in the center of camp, ashes scattered around it.

Behind where he had been sitting, Pix was tossing rocks up into the air for the dragons to snap at and spit back out again. He ducked as one shot flame right above him, cloak discarded on the grass nearby, and as he lost his balance and fell onto his back Odysseus sniffed him with concern. Fwhip saw him scratch the dragon under the chin much like one with a cat. He heard a single small laugh as Hyacinth strode over as well.

(It's been scientifically proven that interaction with animals can boost one's mood and improve overall mental health. Pix most likely did not know this fact, but over the months, he'd grown quite

fond of the two dragons.)

(They were quite friendly with him, and for that he was quite grateful, even though he couldn't stop remembering the look he got from the Mother Dragon as he shot her full of arrows.)

(He was still trying to figure out how to apologize for that one. He figured the best way to go would be being nice to the two that they had here, so far out.)

As he was getting sniffed by the two dragons, Fwhip walked over, still trying to pretend that argument had never happened. "Need some help getting up?" he said, leaning over him.

Pixl's eyes were closed. He shook his head.

"Have fun getting eaten by the dragons," then," said Fwhip jokingly, stepping back some. Pix lay on the ground a little before he bolted upright. It was so comical and so sudden that Fwhip had to laugh.

"Dude, dude, it was a joke," he said. "I'm sorry. They only eat people if they're dead."

Pix squinted at him with an honestly understandable amount of suspicion, and Fwhip couldn't help from grinning. "Okay, okay," he said. "I'm sorry."

Pix punched him lightly on the arm, and Fwhip returned the favor. "So," he started. "You were rolling around in the dirt just then. Me and Gem have just gotten baths in the river, do you want to? We can even get your clothes clean."

Pix looked down. "I don't know," he said quietly.

"That's okay," said Fwhip. "There's a bunch of holes at one end, in the water I mean, and you can submerge yourself completely and still have your head poking out the top. It's great. Bit cold, but y'know, I went in there before the water got heated up this morning, so that's to be expected."

Pix looked over at the river, uncertainty clear in his stance, and Fwhip went on.

"You don't have to," he said. "But Gem's all the way on the other end of camp-" he thumbed backwards- "and I promise you I won't look. We can get you a blanket or something when you get out. Not sure about how we're gonna get your clothes washed, though-"

Pix made a dismissive gesture with one hand, as if to say "don't worry about it, I can wash my own laundry."

"Nice," said Fwhip. "Wait right there. I'll go get the soap."

And thus began the cleansing of Pixl C. Riffs, the first he'd had in a long while.

(It wouldn't be the last either, but we'll get to that.)

As the clouds amble gently above our travelers and their doings, I'll go ahead and give a little bit of context for the most recent argument between the two siblings.

See, when Gem was 15, she was next in line to be heir to the dutchy of the Grimlands and the pressure was piling up. As expectations mounted and her sleep schedule grew worse and worse, she did what any desperate teenager who was secretly studying magic and who had no real guidance did and started forming a plan to get out.

This plan involved three simple steps:

1. Nick a bit of amethyst and an invisibility potion from the castle's underground storage room.
2. In the dead of night, whisper the sacred over words over a chalk-and-amethyst sigil. Do not wake your brother up in the next room. Do not let anyone hear you. Ignore your voice quavering. Ignore your pulse pounding in your ears.
3. Run.

Luckily for Gem, her plan worked out flawlessly.

Unluckily for Fwhip, who was 11 at the time, the exact same thing happened.

He was woken up at 4 in the morning by some random adult that he didn't know and shoved out of his nice warm bed into his sister's room.

"What is the meaning of this?" the person hissed. "Where did she go?"

(Narrator's note: Gem was out to basically the entire nobility at this point because she'd assumed they'd take it well. They did not take it well. This is part of the reason that she ran.)

(Despite basically the entire castle except for Fwhip (and even he had to give some ground most of the time except for referring to her around his friends) misgendering her horribly, I have taken the creative liberty of not doing that for hopefully obvious reasons.)

(Let's continue.)

"What?" he asked, rubbing his eyes. "She's gone?"

"Don't act all innocent!" snapped whoever-it-was. "Of course she's gone! She blew up the wall!"

"I don't have anything to do with it, though," said Fwhip, confused. "Can I go back to bed?"

"Not until you clean up this room."

"But it's not mine?"

"Well, it's your responsibility now."

Suffice it to say, Fwhip didn't know what was going on and didn't hold the kindest opinion of his older sister for a while.

The reunion was just as rocky. The two met when Fwhip was 16, hair freshly cut.

("So," said Gem. "It looks like we switched roles.")

("Yeah," said Fwhip. "You gonna say sorry?")

("You've caused quite the stir," said Gem.)

("That doesn't answer my question.")

It took... a while for them to get everything figured out.

And even regarding the fact stated directly above, the two (the wizardess and the mechanic with grease eternally smudged on his one-size-too-large shirt) eventually got to the point where they could discuss old griefs without it chafing too badly, like slipping on a slightly damp and heavy-woven shirt.

Not here, though, with Gem trying her hardest to just hold on for the next couple months without tripping over any minefields, and Fwhip, who was holding the detonator.

(Boom, bitch.)

Let's continue.

At sundown, Pix walked back from the river, feeling extremely vulnerable for some reason. Maybe it was the fact that the dirt and mud and sand caked on his skin had finally been somewhat scrubbed off or the fact that his clothes were clean and no longer smelled like sweat for once, but it felt like he was wearing a different man's body.

The shouting in his head had started again: accusations, jeering, and the ever-looming threat of pure atomic disassembly of the mind.

He knew he would not be talking tonight, and with Fwhip and Gem clearly at odds with each other, the air around the fire was sure to be tense enough to rip his sinews straight from the bone.

Maybe he'd just grab something from the food bag and go eat with the dragons as company.

He approached where the fire was supposed to be, but even though the sun was setting there was no glow denoting that one had even been built yet. Fwhip and Gem were both nearby, neither looking at each other.

Damn. Okay, then.

With a silent sigh, Pix grabbed a match and some firewood, struck the match, and tossed it into the center. With the way things were going, he didn't expect any thanks. Which was fine. He didn't really want any either for something as simple as this.

Rummaging through the food bag, he took out a single Japanese radish and walked 28 feet to where the dragons were, sitting down and taking a bite. It was a little bit bland and a little bitter, but it would at least hold him over until the morning.

Hyacinth craned her neck to sniff at the radish, and he had to grin as he pulled it away from her mouth. "You can't have that, you know," he said. "I have to eat too."

(Looks like he would be talking- but not to any people.)

Lately, Pix had found himself getting into the habit of talking to the dragons like one would a cat or a dog. This held true now, as he tried his best to eat dinner while being stared at from both sides.

"You can both have the stem later if you want, but it'll be a minute," he said, taking another bite. He should really have put some salt on this.

"Hrrmph," said Odysseus.

"I said *no*," responded Pix.

Hyacinth huffed.

"You're the one who distracted Fwhip while your brother ate the steak off of the spit yesterday," said Pixl. "You're not innocent either."

(When he finished the radish, he split the leaves at the top in half and split them evenly between

the two.)

The next morning was just as tense as the night before, but Pix was a man who had lived with tension in many places. He packed things silently as the siblings circled like binary stars around the camp, tending to their own affairs. He made sure the map was neatly folded before it was packed into its bag. He mounted Odysseus behind Fwhip as he always did, the movement practiced and easy now.

Gem had predicted two days ago that they were about a week and a half out from the desert.

Pix could not honestly say he was excited about that.

Of course, ever since their course had taken them back west, he knew they'd have to pass back into the desert at some point. The portal back lay right outside of it, anyways, on the edge between the savannah and the northern desert.

The other two didn't know how to survive there. They didn't know what was edible and what was not, how to collect dew for water in the mornings, that you had to travel by night and find shelter by day.

But still. The heat. The rot. The days spent wandering in a haze. The heat. The rot. The rot. The stench of a corpse on the open dune, picked clean within days.

Even at the thought of it, that old fear came trundling back into his mind, and his hands gripped a little tighter around the back of Fwhip's coattails.

"To the desert it is, then," he muttered as the twin dragons took off.

Chapter End Notes

yes the 28 feet japanese radish was a direct reference to that one tumblr meme because my brain is fried and i think it's funny

Edit: Hey guys! So after some people left some comments, I've realized 11 chapters in that maybe not having a consistent timeline to refer back to while writing isn't the best for consistency. I want to get all of that sorted out while working on Chapter 12, so it'll probably be delayed for a fair bit while I get everything figured. My apologies, and again, thank you all for the support. :]

A Gentler Peace

Chapter Summary

A late-night conversation between Pix and Fwhip, who woke up and found himself being hugged very hard.

Chapter Notes

i was starting to wear myself out with the plot progression so i went ah fuck it i'll throw some fluff in there. and then while writing this i realized that this was taking a hard left into Actually Important Conversation territory, so I ran with it. and now we are here :)

That day's flight had been tiring, moreso than usual. The changing seasons mixed with the ever-bright sun that they were now flying directly into made Fwhip pull his goggles down and sneeze into his scarf more than occasionally, but all things considered they were making pretty good headway.

He and Gem were back to talking, albeit in short and curt phrases like they had communicated in when they'd first found Pix two months ago, but both of them understood that now was not the place to air out this, these oldest of griefs.

Dinner had been cooked and shared, and Fwhip had drifted off at one point with his back to Odysseus, Pix sitting beside him, the slow rising and falling of the dragon's chest a comfortable lulling rhythm that one could dream along to.

The air was still and quiet as it usually was, but a nice temperature and tinged faintly with the scent of wood smoke. Fwhip didn't know exactly when he'd drifted off, but he sleepily woke before the sun at least a couple hours later to Pix leaning heavily on one of his shoulders, arms wrapped tightly around him, fast asleep.

"Huh," he said quietly to himself, looking around. Gem couldn't be seen anywhere nearby- she'd probably taken the night watch- but guessing from the fact that neither of the dragons had moved from the places they'd fallen asleep the night before except perhaps to turn onto their backs, she was probably nearby.

Pix had taken to sleeping by himself more and more often when he wasn't running the night watch, but he always remained nearby. When he did sleep, he slept hard, and on the night that his nightmares were absent he slept with a tired, but peaceful face.

Fwhip knew that it took a lot of trust to fall asleep next to someone, much less directly onto them, so he returned the favor the only way he could at the moment and wrapped his arms around Pix's back, just holding him there.

It was nice.

As reluctant as he was to admit it out loud or even to himself, Fwhip was actually the sort of guy who enjoyed a good hug. Who didn't? Someone once had told him it was important to mental health or something anyways.

During their journey, though, Fwhip had found himself wanting- almost yearning for- something simple, like leaning against his sister while he was working on something with his hands. He knew realistically that she wouldn't mind, but he could never work up the courage to ask, and it'd probably be awkward anyways.

This, though... this was nice. He could stay here a while.

Fwhip leaned harder against Hyacinth's side, making sure to not bother Pix in the process, and settled there comfortably, warm and starting to doze off a little again.

In his arms, Pix shifted a little, and Fwhip lessened his grip just in case he wanted to move or something, but he only scooted a little bit forwards and hugged him tighter, head back on Fwhip's shoulder.

"Yeah," said Fwhip with a yawn, half to himself. "It's nice." Almost automatically, he started scratching Pixl's back gently, and Pix sighed a little- maybe in sleep, maybe not.

"I missed you, man," said Fwhip quietly, still half to himself. "We all did, I think."

That got Pix to wake up a little. "Really?" he asked.

"Yeah, really," said Fwhip with a small snort. "What, did you think all of us just went 'oh, this guy we've known for years is gone with no trace after visibly not doing very well for a while, oh well, guess he's gone?'" It was meant to be a joke, but Pix stayed silent. "No," Fwhip continued. "No, dude. You just can't let people go that easy. Everyone was worried."

"Even Sausage?" asked Pix.

"I mean," said Fwhip, "maybe. I bet he was all like 'oh no I can't prank this guy any more!' and was really sad about it."

Pix laughed quietly over his shoulder. "That does sound like something Sausage would say."

"Yeah," said Fwhip. "Yeah."

It was quiet for a little longer, a sort of gentle sense of peace settling over both of them, the same sort that you felt while reading a favorite book by the soft yellow glow of a lamp, the same that you felt as a child when driving home in the backseat of the car, highway lights flashing periodically, rain on the windows, and you know that if you pretend to be asleep your parents will carry you inside over your shoulder and tuck you into bed.

Pix leaned back and put his back to Hyacinth as well so that the two were shoulder-to-shoulder, and Fwhip yawned again.

"Seriously though," he said, "we were worried about you. I asked everyone who would respond to me if they'd gotten anything and everyone said no. I went through the desert and checked but found nothing, and I think Jimmy put out search parties too, and eventually like six months afterwards I sent him a message saying, I know you hate me but I've been looking for him too and I'm sorry but I couldn't find him either. Jimmy sent me a message back saying something along the lines of 'it's okay, it's not your fault, we both tried our best, never fucking message me again.'"

"Sounds like Jimmy, alright," said Pix with a sigh. "But did you really search for me for six months?"

"Oh, yeah," said Fwhip. "I went out on Odysseus and combed the desert as often as I could without the court skinning me alive."

"When did you do it?" asked Pix. "During the day?"

"Yeah."

"That might be the reason why, then," said Pix. "Those cloaks are specifically designed to blend in with the desert, and anyone who's lived there for more than a week knows that the best time to travel is at night, when it's cool."

"Oh," said Fwhip. "I definitely knew that."

"It's alright," said Pix with a sigh. "You didn't know."

Fwhip had to wonder, suddenly, how close he'd gotten to finding Pix sometimes. Had he ever flown directly above him during his rounds? Had he missed some sort of frantic hand-waving?

"That's a lot of effort to go to for one man, though," Pix continued quietly.

"It wasn't to me," said Fwhip, looking over. "I'd have done it for my siblings because they were my siblings and I did it for you because it was you."

Pix looked up at him, and even in the dim light of a crescent moon Fwhip could see that his face was drawn and creased. In the moonlight, he looked a million years older: some old god, maybe.

"Even after everything I've done?" he asked quietly.

Fwhip didn't quite understand. "Pixl," he said. "You realize that I'd have gone looking for you no matter what, right?"

Pix looked up at the dark clouds scuttling in and did not answer.

"Right?" Fwhip repeated.

Pixl took a deep breath. "I can't explain it right now," he said, looking down. "I don't- this just isn't the time. I'm sorry. I swear I'll explain everything to you and Gem someday. Maybe then you'll be able to figure out what your definition of 'no matter what' actually is."

"It's okay," said Fwhip, patting his back somewhat awkwardly. "Take your time."

His mind, though, was spinning. Figure out what? "No matter what" is "no matter what". This was the most Pix had talked in- well, in literal years, and Fwhip had tried his best to memorize every syllable of his end of the conversation. Even if he didn't exactly know what it meant. Especially if he didn't know what it meant.

There was something going on here, that much had been clear ever since him and Gem had picked him up months ago, but Fwhip didn't really know what that something was.

"I'm just glad to have you back," he said, leaning back and closing his eyes again. "I'm just glad you're talking again."

"Well, I wouldn't mind saying a couple more sentences every now and again, if that's the case,"

said Pix with a hint of his old humor. "Really though. I'm sorry I caused you all of that trouble."

"You don't need to apologize," said Fwhip with another yawn. "You just need to stick around so that me and Gem can have someone else to talk to instead of butting heads with each other constantly."

"I'll try," said Pix as Fwhip felt himself slipping off to sleep again. "I'll try."

The Sudden Diminution of Gynaeve Tay

Chapter Summary

They land in a forest, in which things creep unseen.

Or,

There is another haircut this time, but far less planned and somehow even more symbolic than the last.

Chapter Notes

warnings in this chapter for graphic descriptions of violence and injuries, a flashback hinting at child neglect, and also a slight description of a zombie that includes rot and decay. onwards we go!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Gem walked past where Hyacinth was curled up besides the fire to finish the usual task of making sure all of the embers were no longer smoldering.

(She walked slowly, distractedly, mind still muddled by sleep: she had been up late last night. Pondering. Thinking. Wondering.)

The night watch, an old cycle to be filled at this point, had to be fulfilled after all.

It had started the first night after her and Fwhip had flown out. The wound was still fresh then, and both of them were both still paranoid, and the world still teemed with dangers. She remembered looking over at Fwhip as they flew, seeing faintly the tears running down his cheeks.

(Fwhip never cried. The last time she'd ever seen it happen was when he was 7, and he'd fallen out of the tall spindly tree that grew outside his window, and his knees were two bloody red messes.)

(Gem had ran over before the adults came. She sat next to him as he sobbed. "One day," she said to him, as serious as a 9-year-old could be, "I'm gonna learn magic. And then when you mess up your knees I'll heal them.")

("That's gonna take years," Fwhip had said with a snuffle. "This just hurts really bad.")

(He'd gotten yelled at when the adults had found them. Small fists clenched. Knees still wobbly. Gem had hovered in the back, unable to do anything.)

"Maybe we should make a fire," she said when they landed.

Fwhip had wiped the salt from his eyes and the snot from his nose, nodded once. "Yeah."

That was the start of the tradition of the hearth.

When the sky set, every leaf that crackled nearby made Fwhip flinch, though he didn't respond when Gem asked questions under a certain volume. He looked over his shoulder at things that were not there. (To be fair, Gem did too.)

"Night watch," he said, getting to his feet, every muscle tensed. "I can't just sit here. I'm going to take a watch."

That was the start of the tradition of the night watch.

When Gem woke up every morning after that, Fwhip was there, scrubbing dirt or blood or something off of his arms. After a week, she silently took her turn. She could not let him do this alone. Neither of them could.

Even when the life around them and the undead that haunted it had become scarce enough that the watch was no longer necessary, they still kept up with it. Sometimes standing, sometimes sleeping. They'd skipped a few nights here and there after finding Pix, but when the sun clawed his way out of the grave every morning, he laid fresh eyes on one of the three last guardians of his fief standing weary sentinel, all soul bent towards the gravity of the light.

The sun said hello. The travelers did not answer, did not answer, did not answer. They turned back to their griefs and their deaths and their dirt and their ashes round the fire and the sun could only watch curiously, faint grief tinging the foggy dew in the mornings, eternally bright head resting on upended palms.

This morning was new, leaning gently against the walls of routine that kept it reined in its confines. Lit from atop by the sun, it stretched, and with it came a faint wisp of cloud: no rain today.

Gem turned from the fire, deep as she was sat in her thoughts, and paused in the middle of lifting two charred logs that had survived that night's blaze.

Across from her sat two brothers, one hers by blood and one by experience.

(You probably understand by now that if Gem and Fwhip didn't already consider Pix a brother before he was found again, they certainly did now. Not even because they had lost Sausage. These sort of things just happen.)

Pix sat with his back to Hyacinth, leaning against her, head tilted back a little. On his shoulder rested Fwhip's head, and across Fwhip's back rested one of his arms, and while Gem did not know of the conversation that had happened between the two the night before, she understood that this was a sacred thing here, a gentler thing: a small mercy amongst the brutal winds of their condition.

In her chest, a tight coil began to unravel, and she found herself breathing a little easier than she had allowed herself to in a long while.

As if awoken by her gaze, Pix woke up and nodded at her, a shadow of a smile on his face, one hand reaching up to rub his eyes.

"Are you two alright over there?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah," said Pix, suddenly seeming to become aware of the fact that he had his brother leaning on him. He sat up a little straighter. "We both just really needed a hug, I think."

Though her mind was elsewhere, she offered him a smile. "I get it. Gets a bit lonely out here, doesn't it?"

"It does," said Pix in a solemn tone. "It really does."

Next to him, Fwhip sat up a little straighter, awake at last, and Gem turned back to the fire without a word.

Maybe that haircut had done him some good, because Pix was feeling... well, maybe not more like himself, but definitely a little less like utter shit.

The thoughts that whispered the script to his own demise were there, oh, he doubted they'd ever leave. In the triple darkness of night and the new moon and his mind, he wrestled with them: one man against the tide. The fear. The pain. The gritting of teeth against the shouts.

Weathered as he was, though, he found himself still standing on stone legs. The waves lapped against his feet. His eyes ever turned towards the sunset.

Stronger. Pixl was feeling stronger.

(He didn't know if he should be scared of that or not.)

He'd given some thought to his options now, weighed his chances, and decided it would be less pain in the long run if he just left alongside Fwhip and Gem. What was eating the most at him? His past. If he left this place and the stars finally crumbled under their own weight at last, at least his rotting soul wouldn't be trapped here for eternity. He'd go somewhere else, live and forget, and there would be nothing and nobody left to remind him of what he'd done. What he'd been.

Pix feared death, but he feared eternity so much more.

(Oh, yes. Pixl feared death. The Vigil was a way to honor it and respect it, but he didn't know what happened afterwards. He wanted to know. He had plunged flaming torches into the core of the earth before. To know and to know and to remember was one of his greatest passions, but he could never know death.)

(That was a rule written in the bedrock of the worlds itself. Nobody ever comes back from that.)

(And if they do, well, there've been horror stories written about that. I'm sure you can think of a few.)

Anyways, ever since that first phrase in the thicket had dropped from his mouth like a small droplet of water or perhaps flame, the dam had burst. In his mind now were sentences: sentences upon sentences upon sentences, some in English, some in the language of his kingdom. They scampered and they ran and they screamed and they whispered. He wanted nothing more than to speak them, but he also didn't want to startle his sibl- Gem and Fwhip.

(*No*, he thought sternly at himself. *Don't do that. Not to yourself. Not to them.*)

Once, in the old days, Pix had been a poet, or something of the sort. He dealt with things large and small. He was well acquainted with the gears that spun in his particular corner of the universe, and he knew when to oil them and why. He'd written a few books of his own here and there. Not uncommon for a king.

Even in his midnight years, in his exile turned sand turned rot, verses still pierced his mind, whirled around, refused to leave. Some had stuck with him ever since. Some he had forgotten.

He'd always tried his best to ignore them, because they felt like a little whisper from something he

couldn't name asking him to come back. Ignoring them felt like a betrayal. The endless little pains felt like a betrayal.

(Then again, Pix was no stranger to betraying himself.)

All of these thoughts and more ran through his head as the twin dragons scudded through the clouds, wings beating in a familiar rhythm.

Fwhip and Gem were still avoiding talking to each other except for when strictly required. Pix hadn't asked why because neither of them had brought it up to him yet, but he figured it wouldn't last long. Siblings always somehow figured it out. (He figured so, anyways. Pix had been an only child, after all.)

Still, he had taken night watch the past couple nights, with no rest in between, and he was starting to doze off. He could figure it out later, but first he had something to ask. With a small sigh, he let a few of those infinite thousands of words careening around out of his mouth.

"We'll be landing soon, right?" he asked, sitting up a little straighter and carefully stretching.

"Yeah," said Fwhip from in front of him. "I think we were going to be looking at the map this evening, although I'm pretty sure Gem has no idea what we're doing."

"Alright," said Pix, letting his arms back down and making sure he was still solidly on the saddle.

"I don't even know what I *did*," said Fwhip with a deep, annoyed sigh. "Well, okay, I did. We got into an argument about me not taking the literal damn apocalypse seriously enough-" he scoffed to himself at this, but went on after a short pause- "and then I brought up her running away from home and she just kind of... walked off."

"Well," said Pix carefully, accentuating the word with a glance over to Gem on the dragon nearby, shoulders set and looking straight ahead at the horizon, "that would explain it."

"I know I messed up, okay?" said Fwhip with a sigh, although the tension stayed visible in his shoulders. "I just know she's not as okay about a lot of things as she says she is. I'm not a therapist. None of us are. We're just trying."

"Yeah," said Pix, and then it was silent for a little bit.

Maybe this would take a while longer than he thought. Oh well. This wasn't his argument anyways.

Ahead of them, the half-rendered wisps of clouds, looking somewhat like wood shavings at this distance, piled and darkened.

As tufts of wool drifting off of gently ambling sheep by the wind, thin portents of rain came stretching towards them like the splayed leaves of towering and holy trees or perhaps their keepers, long-haired all, the last faded ambrotypes of a religion far too old to be held sacred by most yet sacred by the oldest rules of life and nature.

The strong and yet infinitely finite wind hit the travelers in the way that only the wind could, leaving at least all of them to feel for a breathless moment that their souls had been blasted backwards out of their frames.

Pix wondered suddenly if the wind was strong enough to knock him off of his seat atop Odysseus. Months ago, he would have not doubted it could. He might even have stretched his arms to

welcome it.

Now, though, he leaned forwards a little and set his face and squinted his eyes against the gale. Pixl was human. He was stronger than the wind, well, in this moment anyways.

"We should probably land," muttered Fwhip, half to himself. He leaned forwards a bit, then, calling over to Gem: "Gem! We need to land!"

"What happened to you avoiding all the storms?" she yelled back, voice high and strangely pitched to the tune of some sudden accusation.

"Doesn't matter!" responded Fwhip. "Come on!"

Like they had been rehearsing this for years, the dragons descended in perfect unison, spiralling gently down to earth like a leaf in spring.

(Icarus, here's your chance.)

They unpacked hurriedly as the winds blew more desperately around them. Raindrops came scattering down like skittering mice, and the wind came in such an angle that soon, the rain was in your face no matter where you looked.

Pix was just trying his best to hurriedly get the pack that contained his book safely sheltered and under cover- thankfully, the bags were all enchanted and were waterproof- when, on the tail end of a warning rumble of thunder, he heard two things: the sound of arguing and a low, guttural moan that could only be produced by a decaying throat.

He stood up and turned around, trying desperately to keep the rain out of his eyes.

"-dare you mention that place!" Gem said, voice rising.

"I mentioned it once," said Fwhip. "Listen. I'm sorry. I said a thing wrong. But you're going off the handle-"

"Off the handle?" asked Gem. "*Off the handle?*" Her hands were on her hips now, a sure warning sign. "You are the one who's obsessed with the Rapture and you won't stop bringing it up-"

"What?" asked Fwhip, voice rising in turn. "Me? Obsessed? I have brought it up a total of five times. In fact-"

"More than five."

"*In fact,*" said Fwhip, talking loudly over her as the storm increased in force, "I'd say that you are the one with his death on your mind. You say you're okay. I have lived with you, Gem, for *years*. I know your tells. And I know you're not as okay about this as you think."

(His voice had taken on a desperate tone, the sort that one acquires when speaking a truth unwillingly.)

(It takes a fuck ton of bravery to talk sometimes.)

Pix had never known a storm to be this silent, or maybe that was just his ears ringing and drowning out all other noise.

Behind Gem, a zombie was slowly approaching, its low growls unheard in the roar and the words being thrown like hailfire and brimstone. Pix shook himself to and tried to find his quarterstaff

amongst the packs. Fwhip obviously didn't see it coming, he was too busy locking eyes with his sister.

"Gem," said Pix, but he couldn't even hear himself. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Gem!"

She didn't look at him.

The zombie was holding a sword that still shone strangely brightly, or maybe it was the rain. Or maybe it was enchanted. Pix walked forwards, feet sticking in the mud. If he went any faster, he would trip, but maybe he would still have a chance. Maybe-

"What?" asked Gem icily, finally turning towards him.

The zombie raised its sword, eyes black and decaying, skin putrid, the wooden crossguard of the sword rattling as it was raised.

He saw everything so, so slowly. So quickly. This was an image he would memorize forever.

He would not be able to get there in time.

"Behind you," he said, too quietly.

Gem's mouth opened as Fwhip saw, too late, and lunged, right as the zombie's sword sliced horizontally at the space where the back of Gem's neck would meet her head.

Pixl heard a metallic *shing*. He saw Fwhip, sword drawn, sidestep his sister and plunge his sword into the zombie's side, drawing it out with a grunt and slicing everywhere he could. He saw the zombie fall, saw whatever passed for its blood spill. Fwhip stood there panting, eyes wild, sword stained. Gem's mouth still hung open, her eyes were now closed.

And here Pix was, standing drenched and desecrated and decayed and delinquent and stuck in the mud, quarterstaff hanging uselessly from one slick palm, unable to move.

If she is dead, he thought, her blood will be on both our hands. Doubly so on mine. Doubly so on Fwhip's. We will never be clean again.

(Then again, Pixl was used to being unclean.)

He blinked once, twice, three times, and found that time had suddenly resumed its normal course. The rain was still falling with desperate abandon. The three were still standing there, completely still. There was a double-dead corpse on the ground behind them.

And something else.

"Gem?" asked Fwhip, first to break the silence. He moved his arm gingerly almost as if testing to prove that he could, then stepped closer towards her to check her neck. "Nothing. No blood, no scrapes. We got incredibly lucky there."

Gem's mouth was closed now, and her eyes were still shut. Pixl forced himself to take a breath and take a careful step forwards, leaning on his quarterstaff as he went.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Fwhip, glancing over at the rot and the slowly oozing dark blood that was staining the ground. He nudged the corpse with his foot. "I'm going to have to clean off my sword, though."

"Gem?" asked Pix again. "Are you hurt or anything?"

Gem slowly opened her eyes and exhaled with a small nod. She reached back, presumably to wring some of the water out of her braid, but her hands only found empty space.

"Oh," she said, feeling the abrupt ends that had been shorn there. Her bangs were already falling loose. "Did it-"

"Yeah," said Fwhip with a pronounced grimace on his face. The rest of Gem's braid lay severed on the ground.

"It didn't get my neck right, did it?" she asked quietly, hand going back there now.

"No," said Fwhip. "I checked. You're good. Everything's fine."

Gem did not respond, but just walked forwards, grabbed a couple bags, and started towards a nearby rocky ledge, giving shelter to the small stone alcove below from most of the rain.

Pixl looked at Fwhip, who raised an eyebrow in return and half-shrugged, and the two walked under the alcove together as the thunder roared and the rain kept on steadily drumming. Pix built a fire. Nobody spoke.

The storm ambled on, gone as suddenly as it had arrived, and the sun set. Somewhere, a bird sang lightly in the east. Pixl took the night watch that evening.

Chapter End Notes

hello i am not a fan of how fast this chapter runs but i'm posting it anyways. also this took 18 days to write because i am experiencing the difficulties hope this helps thanks for reading

Wild Goose (...Wait, That's Not A Goose) Chase

Chapter Summary

Since her humans don't seem too inclined to move from the village they've landed in, Hyacinth has a field day and the boys find something special.

Or,

Filler chapter? Filler chapter!

Chapter Notes

WE ARE SO BACK.

hi just got back from hiatus its been many weeks. finals happened. i lived bitch hows it going yall

i have rewritten this chapter three times because i couldnt find a way to freshen it up a lil and then i went "huh what if i made this from one of the dragons' povs" and it stuck!

welcome back everybody and thanks for sticking with me :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Hyacinth dipped low, spinning below the clouds she had grown accustomed to over the years. The passenger on her back, the fast-moving and friendly... whatever the species, they had been taking care of her for years.

Nearby, Odysseus continued his rather slow descent, eyes scanning the ground for food. Made sense. He had to carry two instead of one, after all, and the two had been flying pretty hard for the past few months.

Hyacinth didn't really mind the creatures on their backs that much. They were small and gave her good food. Right now, she was more concerned about a good place to land. She also didn't much care for the strange hollowed boulders these creatures raised, or why they lived in them, but they tended to be distressed when she knocked them over so she decided to not do that.

Ah! An open space! That would do!

The two dragons landed (quite lightly, for their size) on the cobbles and spread themselves out on the ground to let their handlers dismount. Hyacinth sniffed a bit at hers as she passed, for she had been quiet as of late, although still eating well.

She caught a glance from Odysseus, and flashed one back in return. (Dragons, although not part of a hivemind in any way, can discern each other's thoughts quite easily, especially if they've been together a while. They mainly communicate through flashes of light in their eyes. Endermen do the

same, although they are prone to get overwhelmed.) *What do you call this species again?*

Odysseus was silent a moment, thinking. *I think they have a name for themselves, but I don't know what it is. I call them the Shapers.*

Hyacinth hummed thoughtful agreement, and the darker Shaper (darker in form and draped in a strange swooshing material, she meant) turned from where he was communicating with another taller one and walked over to pat her on the head. She could not understand what he was saying, of course, never having been formally taught, but she did recognize a couple of food words.

There were three Shapers traveling with them, two that she was intimately familiar with and one that was new. Hyacinth knew them by smell, by the patterns their brushes traced over her scales, by the itches they scratched at night. She knew them slightly by sight, but it was easy to get confused. (Dragons only see in greyscale and shades of purple, after all.)

The first Shaper, the one who had taken care of her most during her early years, wore the shade Hyacinth was most acquainted with: purple. She smelled of strange soil and the electric buzz of magic, of flowers unfamiliar to a native of the End. When the Void above turned to an ocean of light, she was always the first awake.

The second was the one she was second most familiar with: decidedly shorter and lacking purple (dragons don't have fashion sense, so Hyacinth took this as a moral failure in a loving sort of way), he smelled of wires crossed and gunpowder and, more recently, steak. He never let her have any. Hyacinth held a slight grudge against him for that.

The third was an odd case. She knew she had seen him somewhere before, in passing. He had smelled of metal and flame and some other element she couldn't quite place. Not a forger, though, for his hair was long. He had been gone a long time, and when the last cold cycle had come he had appeared again, smelling of that same strange element and the musk of zombies and death and salt.

He was friendly despite the smell, though infinitely more quiet than the other two Shapers, and obviously knew how to care for dragons, though whenever their eyes met she read some strange grief and regret there. (Dragons know regret, although it seldom comes to them. Dragons also know grief, as most creatures know grief.)

Strange case indeed.

Now was time for a walk, the forger indicated. Hyacinth could have followed him just fine without him taking the reins, but she didn't really mind. Odysseus padded along in tow.

This land was low, and rather flat, and the path she trod on went from tough stones that her claws clacked against to a softer sort of material that always got stuck in the crevices of her belly. A low raised-boulder came into view ahead, and the forger checked behind to make sure both were still following and let go of the reins.

Another thing about Shapers: they were very insistent that they got their way. Even if they weren't, they were: Hyacinth liked to joke about it with Odysseus and poke gentle fun about it to them. They usually didn't put anything in harm's way, though, so again, she didn't mind.

One thing that she found strange was their insistence that if the dragons could fit inside something, they should go in. Hyacinth did not mind the wind, or the rain. She did not care for the world's storms, for she was of the world and of its will.

She understood the pride in making something- if she or Odysseus were to ever bear a child, she knew both of them would revere them as the foreign beasts of the Nether did their gold -but she did not believe that any of the creatures, Shaper or not, had ever been in this place. Had the forger built this himself? She sniffed at the walls, confused.

Does he think that such flimsy walls will protect us? asked Odysseus with a snort. *We are stronger than both combined. This must be a joke.*

Come down from your diamond pillar, said Hyacinth offhandedly. (Dragon equivalent of "get off your high horse.") *I think he is asking for his comfort, not ours. The Shapers tend to congregate under these false skies. I don't think we'll both fit, though.*

Well, hopefully he doesn't mind if I stay over here, said Odysseus. *I'm not going in there.*

Hyacinth didn't respond, as she was too busy snaking her way into the building and finding that she could indeed fit inside it if she curled up tightly enough. Once the walls were done shaking, she looked over at the forger, who was looking at her with surprise. He grinned.

In response, Hyacinth puffed a column of smoke his way, and he laughed as he fanned it away from his face.

Hope he's happy with this, because I am NOT moving, thought Hyacinth as she tried her best to get comfortable against the poking and prodding of the thin sticks she was reclining on.

Night descended on onyx wings.

The Shapers had constructed a fire a careful distance from the (presumably extremely flammable) walls and were gathered around it, silent. Odysseus was out in the fields hunting sheep. Hyacinth would have to go hunting soon as well, she sensed.

With a muttering and a nod, the Shaper with grief in his voice got up from the fire and leaned gently back against a twist of Hyacinth's side, legs out, head tilted towards the sky.

Dragons don't sleep. But humans do. And after years of being around them, Hyacinth knew that they preferred stillness and silence when resting.

Settling down, she allowed herself to be still. With velvet wings folded slightly clumsily against the wall and magenta eyes closed, her only movements were the slow rising and falling of her chest. She simply lay there and listened to the sounds of the strange night of the Overworld: the whisper of wind against wooden walls, the familiar roar of Odysseus returning from the hunt, the quiet breathing of the Shapers on the other end of the room and right beside her.

Hyacinth took pride in staying awake when the rest of the world was asleep, even if that reason was solely because she could snap awake at a moment's notice. To be fair, her smaller companions could too, but 90% of the time they had trouble waking up at all.

She cracked open one eyelid as Odysseus' head appeared in the opening on the other side of the wall, let out a soft huff, and disappeared again. Rough footsteps thundering, he went quiet a few minutes after padding away and (Hyacinth guessed) lying down. Then it was quiet again.

It wasn't supposed to be quiet. She knew that much.

She and Odysseus remembered a different silence, a warmer one, a silence that was less of a silence and moreso a lack of familiarity with the concept of sound. They had slept soundly in an egg

designed to evade all harm. Then there had been a great shrieking, and a feeling of floating for a time, and when they emerged there was a horribly bright light. That was when the noises of the world came.

The world above was- well, Hyacinth would have called it annoying when she was younger, if she had been asked. Too big and too bright and always demanding something of her. Too many noises. The constant clatter of wheels against stone and the shouting of the forgers in their fire-halls and the screeching of hawks was enough to drive anyone mad.

It was a lot, and Hyacinth had always known, subtly, that she was born of a different lot, one used to silent power instead of the noisy clanging of these strange two-legged creatures and their beasts.

She'd managed, though, and Odysseus too, albeit less gracefully than she did. He'd gotten some teasing from her for that over the years. Someone had to keep him in line, after all.

Thinking about me? came the thought through the walls, grumpy.

Hyacinth flicked her tail as softly as room would allow. *Yes, just reminiscing.*

There is a lot to reminisce about, Odysseus conceded, a bit softer now. *The city was nice, if loud.*

You never did get used to the noise, responded Hyacinth with a gentle poke in his direction. She got a strong wave of annoyance in return, and she snorted quietly into the wall.

It's just so quiet, isn't it? asked Odysseus quietly.

Outside, the breeze blew gently. The grass rustled. The air inside of the raised-boulder was still, but there were no other sounds. No cries of birds. No howls of wolves or other such beasts.

Yeah. It is.

The next day was mostly spent trying to get Hyacinth out of the barn without breaking anything.

"Okay," said Fwhip, stepping backwards, resigned frustration in his voice. "Let's try this again."

It was high noon, and Pix was watching Fwhip try and coax an entire dragon out of what was basically a shack to no avail. The air was sweet and unusually warm, and as Hyacinth huffed at Fwhip, he could have sworn he heard a "well, what do you WANT me to do?"

He had to crack a smile, just because this was exactly the sort of thing the two of them used to do together. It vanished just as quickly for the exact same reason.

"Okay," said Fwhip, hands on his hips. "Pix, get over here. I need help."

Pix didn't move, but merely raised an eyebrow.

"Please," Fwhip added, looking over his shoulder and seeing his expression.

"That's more like it," said Pix, walking over and looking down at Hyacinth, who currently had her head flopped down on the ground in either defeat or annoyance. Or both. Both seemed about right. He stood there for maybe 20 seconds, just looking.

"So are you going to help me, or?" asked Fwhip finally, clearly at the end of his rope.

Pix was silent for a moment more, half bartering for time, half enjoying watching Fwhip get more

and more annoyed by the moment.

"Well," he said finally, "I think she's stuck."

(Ah. There he is.)

"I know that!" said Fwhip. "That's why I called you over here!"

"Surely you don't expect me to drag her out of here myself," said Pix, deadpan. "Do we even have a rope?"

Fwhip glared at him, and Pix realized a little bit too soon that maybe he hadn't approached the situation with the best attitude. He cleared his throat. "Uh, well, looks like if she just folds her wings and walks through-"

Gem, walking by, took one look at the dragon stuck in the barn, one look at the bickering boys, and hauled open one of the huge doors herself.

"There," she said. "Problem solved."

"Oh," said Fwhip. Pix just stared at the door.

"Sometimes I wonder where your heads would go if they weren't attached to your neck!" said Gem cheerfully, and in a tone that indicated that at this point their heads probably shouldn't be on there considering the intelligence of the brains therein. "There's a creek nearby. I'm going to go look for frogs."

"Why frogs?" asked Fwhip as Hyacinth walked out, extremely miffed, and stretched and shook out her wings.

"Because nowhere in any of the books I've ever read was it mentioned what type of frogs live in this region, just that they were different," said Gem. "I want to look for them so that I can document them when we get out." Pix looked over at Fwhip, who just shrugged. "Besides, I think we all need a break."

"Good point," conceded Fwhip, scratching the back of his head. "So... meet back here at sundown?"

"Sounds good!" said Gem, walking off with a wave. "Bye!"

The two watched her go for a while, then turned to look at Hyacinth, who was busy fixing her scales. She looked up, saw them looking at her, and gave an affronted huff.

"Sorry," said Fwhip, turning to Pix. "So, uh."

"Yes?" asked Pix, turning to him.

Fwhip bounced up and down on his heels, hands behind his back, staring at the ground. "Do you know what we're," he waved a hand in the air, "y'know? Activity?"

"That is a really good question, actually," said Pix, turning to look around him. "The answer is no. I sort of haven't had a chance to relax in..." He let the sentence trail off as soon as he realized what he was about to admit.

"Yeah," said Fwhip. "Me neither. I guess we could like, sit on our asses and play 20 Questions or something."

"I know you're joking, but that sounds like the least fun thing I could think of doing right now," said Pix.

"I wasn't joking, though," said Fwhip, looking at him confusedly. Pix looked back at him for a nanosecond too long, then back towards Hyacinth.

"We could do something like, I don't know," he started uncertainly, not actually having any ideas.

Thankfully, he was spared from the mortifying ordeal of having to come up with one by Hyacinth snapping to attention, nose flaring, and bounding off into a nearby field of last year's wheat.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," muttered Fwhip to himself. He started running after the dragon. "Hyacinth! Get back here! Where the FUCK are you going?"

Pix looked around him, then back towards where Fwhip was already being eclipsed by the grass, sighed, and started off after him at a still fast but far more leisurely pace.

"Guess there's that settled," he muttered to himself, trying to figure out where the fuck the two had gone.

Although he was going as fast as he could, Pix found himself lagging farther and farther behind. Which was fine. It wasn't like the path they'd left behind was *subtle*.

The fields were quite nice, actually. He ran a trailing hand across the stalks behind him, half-entombed in thought and memory. These would be growing full and tall during the summer, golden in the evening's glow, ready to be ground into flour to be baked into bread and sweets.

He thought, for a split second and with a sudden yet intense ache, that it would be nice to have warm bread again. Not even with butter and herbs. He could go without those. Just something nice again.

He shook the thought aside and continued down the path. No time for reminiscing. He had two idiots to track down.

As he exited the fields, the rest of the landscape came into the view. On the left were vast fields with rolling green hills bordering them gently. On the right stood a forest of oaks and pines, grey but still resplendent in their solemnness. In front was what could be called a very large hill. It was really quite the nice view, and Pix would have loved to stay and linger, but unfortunately he had a very hard focusing on all of this due to the dragon careening merrily around the border of the woods like a bull in a china shop, with Fwhip hovering nervously nearby.

"Dude," said Pix as he walked up. "Could you at least have slowed down a little?"

"Dragons are like cats, you can't control them," said Fwhip. "Why didn't you try going faster?"

Pix gestured to his hair and beard, which was heavily streaked with grey, and then down to his entire body. "I'm an old man. I have old man knees. I can't keep up."

"Aren't you like, 40?"

"Yes. Again, I'm an old man."

"I'm only eight years younger than you!"

"That is irrelevant, you're still young, and this is your dragon, not mine."

"Technically, she's Gem's," said Fwhip.

"Okay," said Pix. "Fine. Whatever! She's still stomping around. Have you even tried asking her politely to stop?"

"I don't think that would work, Pix," said Fwhip. "I mean, if you want to try, be my guest, but I mean..."

Ignoring him, Pix walked forwards and waved his arm, catching Hyacinth's attention. She paused a second to look at him.

"Hello," he called. "If you're going to go hunting, could you maybe do it in the fields? You're sort of trampling a lot of trees here."

The dragon just looked at him dubiously and snorted. "Told you," said Fwhip with a sigh. "It's like herding-"

With a mighty gust of man-made (dragon-made?) wind, Hyacinth took to the skies, headed over the fields and towards the hills in the distance.

"You were saying?" Pix asked dryly.

Fwhip sighed. "You know, it's really really good to hear you being a smartass again. Seriously. I missed it. But also, I absolutely do not miss it one bit."

Pix looked at him, head cocked slightly sideways. "You were missing me being a smartass?"

"Well, not just that," said Fwhip, suddenly very interested in the treeline to the right of him. "It was also basically everything else. But yeah. The classic Pixl sarcasm. Spice of life."

Before Pix could properly process that, Fwhip conspicuously cleared his throat and pointed towards the treeline. "I think I see something moving," he said loudly.

Pix squinted at the trees. Nothing. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," said Fwhip, gently punching him on the arm and walking forwards. "It must be your old man eyesight."

Pix sighed as he followed, knees starting to ache from such quick movement in such a short time. "At this point, I'll be needing a cane."

As they approached, Fwhip slowed down to the point where Pix could catch up with him. He stopped a few feet before the tree line.

"Find something?" asked Pix. Fwhip didn't reply. Pix followed his gaze downwards and found, in a nest that appeared recently fallen, a juvenile cardinal that had gone silent at their approach. It looked up at them with silent eyes, and Pix looked over at Fwhip.

"Maybe we should wait a minute," said Fwhip uncertainly. "If its mom is somewhere-"

Pix knelt as smoothly as his knees would allow. "No, it's shaking. It's hungry, I think."

"Huh," said Fwhip, crouching down as well. "This looks like a cardinal. I only know that because I was made to learn all of the courts of nobility as a kid and one of the important ones had a cardinal crest. It was pretentious as fuck. Wish they'd also included how to feed them, though."

"Sounds about right for Grimlands politics," said Pix semi-absently, holding his hand out for the little bird to hop onto. It stayed shock-still, and he drew it back gently. "They teach you the spitting image of an empire at the height of its power and never how to keep it fed."

"Yeah," said Fwhip, sounding surprised. "How'd you know that?"

"Just a guess," said Pix.

"Birds eat seeds, right?" asked Fwhip. "And worms."

"Most smaller ones do, I think," said Pix. "We could ask Gem when we get back, if she's in the mood. I feel like she'd know this sort of thing."

"Yeah," said Fwhip. He continued looking at it.

"Hand me your scarf," said Pix, extending a hand.

"What?"

"You'll get it back," said Pix, gesturing back towards himself. "Give me your scarf."

Fwhip shrugged and handed over his scarf, and Pix gently scooped up the bird in it and wrapped it up. Leaning against a nearby tree for support, he stood up and started back towards the field.

This time, Fwhip was the one who had to keep up. "Are you sure about this?" he asked. "It's really small. It's really fragile. What do we do if we can't feed it?"

Pix looked at him. "Then we find something else to do until we can," he said.

Having rummaged through the bags to find some seeds, Fwhip had carefully scattered some onto the ground for the cardinal to eat. He watched closely as the bird pecked at it, and drew back a little every time the cardinal looked back up at him.

Pix was sitting against the wall, breathing slightly labored. Fwhip had asked him if he was alright before and he'd said yes, just tired from the walk. Made sense. Fwhip figured they weren't all in the best state.

"I'm back," Gem announced cheerfully as she walked in.

"Any luck with the frogs?" asked Fwhip.

"Nope. Rivers were all dried up. Is that a bird?" asked Gem, setting the bag down carefully and walking over to look.

"Damn, that sucks. Yeah. I think it's a cardinal."

"We're not keeping it, right?" asked Gem, looking him seriously in the eye. "You know we can't afford an extra living thing."

"Well, it wasn't my idea," said Fwhip.

"Still. We're not keeping it."

"Actually," said Pix, sitting up a little straighter against the wall and opening his eyes, "you're right. You're not going to keep it, but I am."

There was a long silence in which Gem and Pix just looked at each other- Gem incredulously, one eyebrow raised, and Pix quite calmly. Fwhip looked back and forth between them, and the cardinal continued pecking at the ground.

"Are those my seeds?" asked Gem, breaking her gaze and gesturing at the ground. "*Fwhip*."

"It's not like we were ever going to use them!" protested Fwhip. "And the bird was really hungry."

"Let me get this straight," said Gem, voice rising and hands on hips. "You two brought home a bird, on a whim, and now you're feeding it out of our stores-"

"We were never even going to use the seeds!" said Fwhip hotly. "We've been planning to get out of here the entire time! Why did you even bring them?"

"Hey," said Pix gently but warningly.

"Why did *you* bring a bird here?" asked Gem.

"Hey," said Pix again, louder. Both turned to look at him. "It's just a bird. We don't need to argue over it."

"But *why*?" asked Gem, deflating slightly as she gestured at the cardinal pecking at the ground yet again.

"Because it was going to die otherwise," said Pix quietly. He held out a hand, and the cardinal hopped cautiously towards up. He looked back up at Gem. "Listen, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking when I did it, but Fwhip is right, we have no use for those seeds otherwise. And there's so little life around anyways, it just felt wrong to let it sit there like that."

"It's just a bird," said Gem.

Pix nodded. "That it is."

"Seriously, why did you bring those seeds?" asked Fwhip, looking up at her. "Did you really think that we were going to stay in one place long enough to plant and harvest them?"

Gem took a deep breath. "The dragons have been out for a while," she said. "I'm going to go see if they're back yet."

Pix picked up a couple seeds and put them into his hand, letting the cardinal peck out of them. Fwhip was silent as she left. Then: "What is *up* with her?"

"Give her time," said Pix. "She's not ready to talk about it yet."

"Talk about what?" asked Fwhip.

Pix looked up. "A lot. That's what. There's a lot that's gone unsaid here in the past couple months."

"Fair," conceded Fwhip, still looking out of the open space that made up one wall of the barn. "So, wanna do Twenty Questions?"

"Absolutely *not*," said Pix with a small, slightly pained laugh. "Not while my knees are recovering."

"Your old man knees?"

"Precisely!"

Chapter End Notes

if you saw where i posted this early by accident instead of saving as draft (why are the buttons RIGHT NEXT TO EACH OTHER) no you didn't ♥

honor in this place (interim, the second)

Chapter Summary

There are things unseen that creep in the night. This is a given, no matter where you are. Not all of these things are internal, though: some lurk in the crevices of the mind.

Or,

Late nightmares are had, and later-night confessions are made.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains detailed descriptions of a panic attack, a nightmare, and heavy themes of trauma. If you are sensitive to these subjects, please take special care to make sure that you are in a place where you can read these things without posing a threat to yourself and/or others. Thank you and enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The night loomed heavy on the inside of the shed, dispersed only by the viscera of firelight and its shadows that projected ghostly fingers onto the walls. Fwhip and Gem were asleep, close together but still some distance apart: Fwhip curled up next to the wall, messily covered in a blanket, and Gem leaning back against the wall, head tilted away from her brother and hands folded on her lap.

Pixl was pondering endings.

He sat by the fire, staring into its slowly dying center. Decades of careful honing, and his mind still wandered. Logs crackling in the center: other trees in other forests he had known, singing with the solid *thunk* of metal against wood. Smoke rising: fog in the mornings, dissipating into afternoon clouds and storms in the summer. Even the fire itself was a memory, gentle and warm and infinitely powerful, stone met metal and with a single *clack* a spark rose and lit a lantern, going up, floating around a single column of stone to remember and be remembered-

A deep and sudden shadow like the dread of some sudden doom or the memory of talons rending upon flesh descended upon his mind, and Pix flinched and came back to himself, looking around quickly.

Where was he? Ah, yes. Sitting on the floor of the barn. Dinner that night had been silent, like meals often were after arguments. Pix himself had not eaten, for even in the waking hours of the day the shadow had lurked in the background and he had completely lost his appetite for want of dread. That probably wasn't helping matters. Eh. He'd skipped meals for the same reason before.

Either way, it was shaping up to be a rough evening if he stayed awake much longer, which was to say rougher than usual. With a sigh, he scooted back away from the fire and towards Hyacinth. Best to sleep before the nightmares came.

He leaned against her gently with a weary sigh that went to his bones, closed his eyes, and felt himself fighting to not slip back into the same recurring dream he'd been having for a while now. The doom spiraled down, down, down...

In the dream, he was 29.

Pixl stood on an eerily square obsidian platform, looking up at the island above him. His throat constricted- not for fear of what was to come, but for what he had done. A vision flickered briefly in his sight, searing, and he clamped his eyes shut hard.

"You okay?" asked Jimmy next to him. Pix took a deep breath and looked over. Still the same as he remembered: blonde hair, wide eyes, head bare. That was good. Sometimes he looked worse.

Pix had responded a number of different ways. He'd experimented. Shrugs, confused looks. "Yeah" was a common one, as was "You wouldn't know". One was a lie. The other could have been a truth if you squinted.

"Let's just get this over with," he said, and Jimmy just blinked at him, confused.

Before Jimmy had time to respond, Pix heard a voice from atop the rock. Fwhip stood on the edge, holding some sort of megaphone. In this dream, he was 21: even more reckless and fiery and bursting with energy than he was now, eyes glinting. Pix had this speech memorized. He muttered it under his breath, keeping time with Fwhip as he shouted- an apology, naturally, one that was soon to go deadly wrong- and trailed off halfway through, forging his way silently through the crowd.

Sometimes, he waited the whole way through for Fwhip to finish. Sometimes he wasted no time in headed to the dragon's perch as quickly as he could. It depended on if he had the strength to fight the memory that night or not.

Tonight, he was feeling a bit sluggish, so he waited a while and braced himself for what was to come.

He climbed the rough-hewn steps, meeting Gem at the top. She was there, hands on hips, chewing on her lip, staring up at the dragon circling above. Pondering.

Pix was tempted to ask her if she was trapped here too. He was tempted to say, "I know you remember the first time we were here." He was tempted, most nights. He never worked up the courage to ask, though, because he always sensed somewhere that if she responded with awareness then the world would break and if she responded with confusion then that would just dampen the wound with salt water.

His eyes skimmed the sky. Sometimes he could look directly at the perch without the world breaking in two. Sometimes he couldn't. He didn't have time for this tonight. He'd just have to run into it headfirst.

Pixl took a deep breath, letting his eyes rest on the bedrock perch that held the waters of the portal to the Overworld (in his dreams, he never made it far enough to even dip a finger in) and nothing happened.

He waited a little, anxiety soothing a little as his apprehension increased. Maybe tonight it'd be easier? He'd have some time to prepare at least, before-

Pix had a split second of warning, flashes of light tearing at the edges of his vision, before all hell

broke loose.

It was like the ground had broken and the sky had cracked leaking the thing it kept at bay crashing down engulfing him in gravity washing him every which way every single apocalypse happening at once and cycling through and he could not breathe. He could not breathe.

It felt like his mind was being ripped apart atom by atom then hastily being sewn back together, millions of times a second, and all the while he was on his knees and someone was screaming with his voice and it hurt so, so bad. There was no concrete place to hold onto. There was no place to hide. He couldn't fucking *breathe*.

Images flashed one after the other in his mind's eye, none lasting longer than a millisecond. A freeze frame of the vision of the Vigil he'd had all those years ago. Sunset over Pixandria. An image of all of the emperors together at the table, grinning and in various stages of revelry.

He focused as hard as he could on his presence amidst the middle of it all. Faster now they came, and less coherent. Copper. His desk. Jimmy, bored at a meeting, leaning sideways in his chair. Fwhip, face covered in soot, grinning like an idiot or perhaps a madman as he held aloft something of metal. In and out, fast, uneven, eyes clamped shut- it was almost over. It hadn't been that bad this time.

As fast as they'd come (a few seconds? decades?), the flickers stopped. Pix found himself on his hands and knees, staring at a somehow solid pitch black void. He looked up, ragged and silently desperate, and forced himself to take a breath.

The room (if it could even be called a room) was unstable, pure black but for a desk, flickering and jittering and emitting bursts of static every few seconds. Somebody was there behind the desk, but he couldn't focus hard enough on their appearance to make out who it was. They were silent.

He was exhausted. The aftershocks still came hard and fast, making him flinch. His head drooped to the ground again, but he forced it back up. This was not the place for weakness.

The shadow, whoever it was, leaned over the desk, and suddenly he was sitting right in front of it, and the shadow was getting bigger, encompassing everything, he skittered backwards, his veins filled with a pure electric adrenaline-laced *fear*-

Pix woke up with a strangled gasp, half-muddy mind propelling him up from where he was curled up sideways on the floor into a sitting position. His heart was still racing. He could not breathe. He could not breathe. He couldn't, breathe,

He looked around, chest still heaving, trying to get his bearings. Right. The barn. The fire had gone out. Fwhip and Gem were- no, just the memory of- the nightmare- it hurt too much right now. He looked away, even though guilt pounded his already fragile mind for it.

His eyes flicked up, meeting Hyacinth's. She was awake. Pixl was suddenly extremely aware of the intelligence in her eyes, knew that she would put the pieces together eventually. This was it.

Dragon here in the barn reminded him of dragon in the End reminded him of- no. The stab of panic came again, and he shut his eyes, gritted his teeth, forced it back down. He was *not* doing this right now. Not now.

With another heavy breath, he forced his eyes back open, just to find that Hyacinth was mere inches from his face, glowing purple eyes meeting wide and fearful hazel ones. Too scared to move, he just sat there frozen. There was nothing he could hide. The nightmare was still fresh on

his mind. What he'd *done* was still fresh on his mind.

Hyacinth blinked once, taken aback, and Pix took that opportunity to scoot backwards as fast as he could, eyes suddenly fixed to the ground. He could feel tears welling up, and he didn't want to do that, not here, not-

A voiceless sentence appeared in his mind, much like sentences do when you're reading them, its words such a shock to Pix that his frenzied brain paused for a second in sheer confusion.

You are forgiven.

"What?" he whispered, voice hoarse. He looked up to see Hyacinth still there. She blinked once, slowly, placidly.

You are forgiven.

"But I," he said, still in that hoarse whisper, still fighting to control his breaths. "I- you saw. You know what I did. I shouldn't- you shouldn't-"

She leaned towards him. For a moment, Pix was absolutely sure that he was going to get killed right then and there, and he thought wildly that he absolutely deserved it for-

Instead, Hyacinth pressed her forehead against his, effectively shutting him the fuck up. He shut his eyes. The tears sprung up again, closer now.

His breaths came easier now, deeper, and he could feel the adrenaline rush tapering off to a small thread of dread and anxiety that he felt surrounded him at all times. Back down to manageable. Still. He did not deserve this. He absolutely did *not*.

Hyacinth leaned back and Pix looked at her again, sensing that she had something to say. Think? Who knew when it came to telepathy or whatever the hell that was. Pixl certainly didn't. He didn't know a lot of things, as it turned out.

Hyacinth looked intently at him, then poked her head in the direction of the two sleeping siblings at the other end of the room. Ignoring the sudden tension that caught his chest, Pix just looked at her incredulously. "*What?*" he asked, softly but still annoyed. "Dude, there's no way I'm-"

Hyacinth poked her head at the dead fire and the people sitting behind it again.

"No," said Pix with a defensive chuckle. "I'm not- no. It's fine. It was just a nightmare."

Hyacinth's head whipped towards him and pressed up against his forehead again, more threateningly this time. Pix heard a low growl in her throat, and as he scrambled backwards she kept following him, wrapping her tail around his torso, tighter and tighter-

"Okay, okay," said Pix hastily, scrambling to get out. Her grip loosened, and he got up as fast as he could, brushing off his cloak. "I'm going. Dear fucking God."

Fwhip was shaken gently but urgently awake by Pix.

He sat up, stretching and suppressing a yawn. "W'is it?" he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

"I-" said Pix, looking over his shoulder at Hyacinth for some reason. He took a deep breath and looked back at Fwhip, as serious as Fwhip had ever seen him. "We need to talk."

"Okay," said Fwhip, failing to suppress a second yawn. "Give me a minute to remember how to function."

He walked out of the front door (well, it was more of an entire missing wall, but whatever) of the barn two minutes later, mind still foggy. The moon was slim, and Pix was staring up at it, fingers tapping anxiously against his leg as if he was waiting for something to happen. Fwhip didn't need to guess what that something was.

Fwhip walked up to him, trying to ignore his own bubble of anxiety that had suddenly appeared in his throat. "What's up?"

Pix opened and shut his mouth a couple times before letting out a frustrated groan and rubbing his eyes with one hand. "Okay," he started. "I'm going to preface this by saying that I planned for none of this. This was all Hyacinth's idea."

"What?" asked Fwhip. Probably not the best way to start a conversation, but give him a break, he was confused as fuck.

Pix sighed. "I had a nightmare," he said with an effort, still looking up. "And it must have woken her up, because she basically pointed her head in you and Gem's direction. I think she wanted me to talk to you about it."

"Okay," said Fwhip, trying to stay focused. His legs hurt. "Can we sit down?"

"Sure," said Pix, sitting against the outer wall with a small wince. Fwhip followed suit and sat next to him.

"Old man knees again?" he asked. Pix didn't answer. "Sorry."

"No, no, it was a good joke," said Pix, somewhat absently. "I'm just trying to figure out how the hell I'm going to actually explain all of this."

"You had a nightmare?" Fwhip prompted.

"Yes," said Pix, looking at the ground.

"Okay. Have you had it before?"

"Often."

"Right," said Fwhip. This didn't sound very good. "And for... how long?"

"Years," said Pix, looking up at the moon again. "Many, many years."

Definitely not good. "Okay, well, is it a bad nightmare?"

"Yes."

Fwhip hesitated, speaking slowly. "Do you want to... talk about it?"

Pix looked up and shut his eyes, clearly pained even from this angle, and Fwhip felt the sudden urge to melt right into the floor. Dear fucking gods. This was hard. "I'm sorry," he said. He was about to say "I'm horrible at talking," but that would sound like he was being a prick, so he kept his mouth shut. Why was this so damn *difficult*?

Pix sighed. "It's not you," he said. "This is just... a really hard topic for me to cover, and I'm not

even sure how to go about it."

"Is it okay if I just let you talk?" asked Fwhip. "I mean, I'm listening. I just don't really know what's going on and you do so." He waved one hand awkwardly, and Pix nodded with a small laugh.

"We are both so bad at this," he said.

"Absolutely," Fwhip agreed.

"Okay," said Pix, still chucking a little. "Gods. Okay. So... you remember the End fight, right?"

"The one where we killed the dragon?" asked Fwhip.

Pix winced a little, and Fwhip was worried he'd fucked up again, but he went on. "Yeah. That one. That's what the nightmares are about."

"Okay," said Fwhip. "I remember you dropped off the map for a few months after that...?"

"I did," said Pix with a heavy sigh. "It... wasn't a good time for me. I was basically haunted by what I'd done."

"The fight?"

"Yeah. There was some stuff going on with the Vigil, and I just couldn't face it for a while. So I left."

"Okay." Fwhip sat back, still clumsily trying to process what was being said. "So... the Ender dragon fight is giving you these really bad nightmares and is also the reason you left the first time?"

"Yeah," said Pix. "And-" He went silent, looking to the side.

"And?" asked Fwhip, as gently as he could for someone who had just woken up five minutes ago.

"It wasn't just the first time," said Pix quietly, looking at the ground. "It- the shame came back, worse. And so I left again, for good this time." He exhaled shakily and dropped his face into his hands. "There is so much more to it than that. So, so much more." He looked up, voice getting more desperate by the syllable. "Fwhip, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have woken you up at three in the morning to tell you any of this, I shouldn't even be *awake* right now but my stupid fucking brain-"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Fwhip interjected hastily. "It's okay. Seriously. It's okay. I don't care. My sleep schedule's ruined anyways."

"Good on me for making it worse, then," muttered Pix to himself, looking away again.

"Hey," said Fwhip, turning his entire body towards him. Pix looked up, and he looked him straight in the eye. "You are obviously dealing with some- I don't know what it is, but whatever it is, it's heavy shit. And in my experience, heavy shit never gets lighter unless you talk about it with someone, get another perspective on it. You know?"

Pix nodded, and he went on. "I've been wondering about this, you know," he said, more quietly now. "All three of us have problems. That's like, the most obvious thing here. But I didn't even have a clue about what was going on with you until tonight. I've been wanting to help, I just... don't really know how. I don't know. Gem's the one who's good with emotions." He sighed. "Actually, I have zero idea what's going on with her either. But thank you for telling me. Seriously."

"Thank you for listening," said Pix. "Really, it means a lot."

"I do have a really awkward question, though," said Fwhip.

"This entire conversation has felt like pulling teeth," said Pix with a small, pained laugh. (Trust me, it's been just as bad transcribing it!) "Go on."

"Why didn't you just tell us sooner?" asked Fwhip. "I- we found you and then you were silent for like, months. I was worried. We were both worried. If I had known this back then, I could have done... I don't know, but I could have done more."

Pix looked him in the eye. "I can't give you the full answer to that yet," he said. "I'm sorry. But the short answer is that I just didn't want to bother you with all of," he waved one hand vaguely in the air, "this." He sounded frustrated, bitter even, and Fwhip had to wonder at who. Hopefully not him.

"I promise you you're not a bother," said Fwhip. "I think you needed this."

"Promise?" asked Pix.

"Promise."

The two were silent for a bit longer, just watching the clouds get closer to the moon then drift away again. Fwhip yawned, and Pixl looked over. "We should probably go back to bed."

"Yeah," said Fwhip. "If you have nothing else, I mean."

"Well, there is just one thing, if you're sure," said Pix.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry. For a lot of things, most of which you don't know about, but I just needed to get it off my chest."

Fwhip nodded, slightly confused and more than slightly concerned. "Alright. Are you ever going to tell us these things?"

Pix hesitated a moment, thinking. "Maybe."

(Well, that's better than nothing.)

"Better than nothing!" said Fwhip, getting up and helping Pixl to his feet. As Pix walked towards the back of the shed barn whatever where Hyacinth was, Fwhip hovered at the door.

"What is it?" asked Pix, settling down against Hyacinth.

"Do you want me to come over there?" asked Fwhip. "Like for moral support?"

"Oh, uh, I'm good for tonight," said Pix. "Thank you though."

"Got it," said Fwhip, giving him an awkward thumbs up before sitting down himself. "Sleep good! I mean well."

"Sleep good, my friend," said Pix with a small smile, and with a silent sigh Fwhip lay back down again and let his mind drift, desperately trying to forget the awkwardness of the past five minutes.

Through the doors, a breeze stirred. An ember in the fire glowed faintly torch-bright for a second before going dark again.

Chapter End Notes

all together now, everyone: FUCKING /FINALLY/ OH MY GODS IT WAS ABOUT DAMN TIME

in other news we finally broke 40k words making this our longest ever fic to date which means that i officially broke my wordcount record writing the most awkward conversation i have ever forced myself to put down on a page. These bitches are so bad at communication oh my fucking god one of yall use your traumatized boy brownie points to buy yourself a damn vowel i am fucking DYING over here and i'm writing the damn shit.

anyways. exhales. we've been waiting 39k words for this. we Finally Made Progress let's go boys,

A Cardinal by Any Other Name

Chapter Summary

Fwhip and Pixl finally get a name for the bird, and Gem goes hunting. The crew prepare to pack up and continue west.

Or,

In which Gem might not be quite as chipper as she appears.

Chapter Notes

Hey! Sorry for the wait! I know I'm not obligated to give an explanation, but I figured I'd drop one here because some of y'all might find it entertaining- basically, we ran out of one of our meds and were stuck in dissociation hell for about a week straight.

Hopefully the next chapter is up much quicker than the wait between this one and c15 was, for reasons you'll see by the end.

Thanks for your patience, and enjoy! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pix woke up early the next morning to hunger gnawing at his stomach and the chirping of a bird somewhere in the room.

His whole body aching and his mind fuzzy, he blinked hard a couple times to try and clear the static out of his eyes. Every time they closed for more than a nanosecond, they threatened to pull him back into sleep again, and Pix knew at this point that if he slept in this state then he might not wake up again.

He briefly considered that as an option, if only to finally fucking escape the nightmares, but considering the fact that he had company now, he shoved that thought out of his mind immediately. Besides, he had no proof that his fear wouldn't just follow him into the next life. It was irrational, but so was a lot of other things he'd done recently.

He pushed himself up to a sitting position with an effort and a groan, and next to him, Hyacinth shifted a little and opened one huge eye.

"Hello," he said with a yawn and a slight wince. "Muscles are acting up this morning."

"Morning," said Fwhip from across the room, facedown on the ground for some reason. He flipped over. "Talking to the dragons again?"

"I've always had a habit of talking to animals," said Pixl, looking over.

"Oh, right," said Fwhip. "I remember that." He shut his eyes again. "Is anyone going to shut the

damn bird up?"

"Yeah, give me a minute," said Pixl, using the wall to help himself to his feet. "I've got it."

As soon as he was fully standing, his vision went black and he dimly felt his body sliding back down to a sitting position. Ears ringing and legs all but screaming in protest, he kept his eyes shut and tried to steady his breathing with one hand on his stomach.

"Oh, shit," he heard Fwhip say from a thousand miles away. Something shifted behind him, and he lifted open one eye to see Hyacinth looking at him and Fwhip staring at him worriedly, with Gem sitting up and rubbing her eyes as well. "Dude. Are you okay?"

Pix could barely hear him over the ringing in his ears. "Yeah," he said faintly, closing his eyes again. "I'm fine. Don't think that's supposed to happen when you stand up, though."

"What happened- oh," said Gem's voice, sounding concerned and vaguely dissatisfied. "Move over, Fwhip. Pix. *Pix*."

Feeling someone shaking his shoulders, Pix forced his eyes open once again to see Gem studying him anxiously. "Yeah?"

"When was the last time you ate?" asked Gem with a sigh, kneeling down and rummaging around in a nearby bag.

"Uh," said Pix, eyes drifting shut again. He tried to raise an arm to rub them, finding he could not. "Three... days, maybe? Could have been four. It's been a minute."

"Well, that explains why you've been collapsing on us," said Gem. Pixl heard a bag rustling.

"Haven't been collapsing," he protested, trying to sit up straighter but just getting a flurry of pained protests from his back in response.

"Maybe not, but you've definitely- okay, listen here," said Gem. "Eyes open."

Pix sighed, and Gem poked him on the cheek. "Eyes. Open."

Pixl wrenched his eyes open to see her staring right at him. At this distance, it became shockingly clear to see the changes the months had wrought upon her face: lined and worn, hair frizzy, eyebags dark and pronounced and dirt smeared across one cheek, if he had any more energy he would have asked her if they could have talked later, for she looked tired. As it were, though, the room was still spinning, so he fought to stay upright.

"Is he okay?" asked Fwhip, scrambling over. "Dude, you just collapsed. What happened?"

"Shh," said Gem. She handed Pix a decently sized chunk of bread, slightly stale. "Listen. You're going to eat this. If you're still hungry, you're going to eat more."

"But," said Pixl, trying to stay coherent, "weren't we getting low on food?"

"I'll go and get more," said Gem. "Eat. Fwhip, keep an eye on him."

"Okay," said Fwhip, sounding slightly hesitant. He scooted over. "Good luck hunting."

"Thanks," said Gem, turning around. "If Odysseus isn't anywhere around here, I swear..."

She walked off, leaving her sentence unfinished, and Pixl sighed and took a bite of the bread.

Finding that it barely registered, he ate the rest of it incredibly fast.

"Okay," said Fwhip from next to him. "Dude. I know we're in the middle of the wilderness and all that, and I know you're having a rough time, but *four days* without eating?"

"To be fair, I kind of forgot," said Pix through a mouthful of bread.

"You forgot," said Fwhip, deadpan. "To eat."

"Yes," said Pixl. His vision was clearing, finally, and he found that his limbs felt light enough to lift now. "I've been somewhat preoccupied, if you couldn't tell."

"Yeah, so am I," said Fwhip, reaching into the bag and peering into it. "How in hell did Gem get bell peppers in here?"

"What color?" asked Pix.

"I don't know, man, I'm colorblind," said Fwhip, squinting at it. He handed it to Pix. "You tell me."

"Ah, green," said Pix, turning it around and inspecting it for spots gone bad. "I prefer the red ones. Oh well." He took a bite- the fruit was crunchy and juicy- and leaned back with a sigh. "Sorry for the scare."

"Yeah," said Fwhip. "Well. Glad you're eating now, anyways."

Pix just nodded, busy devouring the pepper.

(There's a type of lopsided silence that seems to appear specifically when someone has narrowly avoided death and they know it. Of course, this wasn't the first time Pix had done this, but it still didn't make it any less awkward.)

They sat there for a little while, the small chirps from the cardinal and the wind sighing desolately through the grass the only noises to be heard. Fwhip looked up, lost in wandering thought, vaguely focusing on the world outside of their little shelter.

"You know," he said finally, "I think I finally figured out what's been bothering me the whole time. About the silence, I mean."

"Yeah?" asked Pixl through a mouthful of bell pepper.

"The cicadas aren't here," said Fwhip. Pixl looked up to see that he'd pulled his knees to his chest, still staring outside.

"Aren't cicadas the loud ones?" asked Pixl. "I think you mentioned them to me the last time I visited the Grimlands. Why would you miss them?"

"Because when I was younger, my mom always said that when the cicadas were here, that meant summer was here," said Fwhip. "It's around late May right now, right? Usually we'd be hearing them by now."

Pixl's newly replenished brain spun around a bit at that, not unlike leaves picked up by a faint spiral of wind to be set back down on the ground a few meters later. He'd been keeping up with the moon on the nights that he could, of course, but he hadn't been keeping as careful an eye on the seasons as he'd have liked. "I guess it is. I didn't realize we'd been out here that long."

"Yeah," said Fwhip. "It was winter when we found you, right?"

“Think so. I mean, the desert’s really hot, and I wasn’t exactly keeping track, especially back then, but that tracks.”

“It *should* be summer then, or at least late spring,” said Fwhip, voice going tight with anxiety. “But there’s nothing here telling us- there’s no- Pix, I know you don’t get it, but it’s not summer until the cicadas and the crickets show up. That’s how it’s always been.”

“That sounds like a wetlands thing, yes,” said Pixl, extending his hand towards the cardinal, who hopped forwards into his palm. “In the desert, we always kept a lookout for the dust storms that came through in the winter.”

“Oh, damn,” said Fwhip.

“Yeah,” said Pixl, startling a little as the cardinal hopped into his outstretched palm. “The sand got everywhere. You’d go out a few days after a storm and there would be corpses of goats and stuff, freshly dead, their bones scoured clean by the sand. There was never any meat left on them. The vultures always got there first.”

“You say that so casually,” said Fwhip with a small laugh. “I know you’re used to dealing with death and stuff, but still, it’s scary coming from you.”

“You say that like whatever Sausage had going on with those blood sheep was normal,” said Pix in return.

“Fair,” conceded Fwhip.

The room fell silent after that, with no dragons to populate the space with their measured breaths and no nature gods to spin music out of the forest nearby. I’ll paint you a picture, if you wish: inside a decrepit and weatherworn barn, freshly abandoned, two men sit. One has flaming hair, and is sat on the packed dirt floor with his knees pulled up to his chest, looking outside and pondering silences and the implications of a dead spring. The other, in far more muted garb and with an air of permanent stillness about him- even in motion, so utterly like a marble statue that it startles one to watch him sometimes- sits crosslegged, slightly hunched over. Hair a brown laced with lights strands of grey, carefully braided in amongst the dirt. In his gently cupped hands sits a crimson-red hope.

Miles away, a woman draws lazy ellipses around a potential source of dinner, takes aim, casually, fires. She’s done this before. The dragon she sits on is used to these sorts of events. Although her hands are confident and make quick work of the corpse she’s skinning, her mind is elsewhere, wandering in a past that will not leave her alone. Amongst ruined streets, her boots clack and stumble: waiting for an opposing rhythm to answer her back.

She inhales, focuses only on the task in front of her. She has been slacking for too long. She needs to pick up the pace, after all.

The sun is awfully rough on her newly exposed neck.

(We’ll get to her in a minute.)

Back in the barn, Fwhip snapped out of whatever reverie he’d been having like he’d remembered something and turned to face Pix. “We still need to name that bird, don’t we?”

“Mhm,” said Pixl, watching the cardinal hop around the room a little ways in front of him. “I would have used one if I could come up for a name for the little guy.”

"Maybe Rose?" asked Fwhip, scooting a bit closer. He squinted at it. "No, too red."

"It's too red to be a rose, which is also red," said Pix, deadpan.

"It's the wrong shade of red! You know what I meant!"

"Okay, fair," said Pix with a laugh. "Reminds me more of a sunset than a rose, though."

"Not to me," said Fwhip thoughtfully. "Looks a little bit like hot metal." He leaned in. "Or coals in a forge."

Pix nodded solemnly at that. The bird was indeed quite a bright red. (Cardinals are known to look like that.)

Fwhip stared at it for a little while, spaced the hell out. Pix was about to lean over and poke him before he came to and snapped his fingers. "That's what I was going to say," he said. "Embers. They look like an ember. That's a good name for a bird, yeah?"

Pix gently picked up the small puff of crimson that now sat patiently in his hand. It was a small thing, maybe two ounces, and it chirped inquisitively as he set them back down.

"Yeah," he said. "Ember works."

Gem walked in shortly after, windblown hair frazzled by the wind, something smelling strong in a bag slung over her shoulder. "Hunting went well," she announced, dropping the bag on the ground in front of the (newly raised) fire. It made a heavy thud as it landed, and Fwhip looked up.

"Well, you're in a good mood," he said as way of greeting.

Gem shrugged and smiled a little. "I am," she said cheerfully. "Got a little bit thrown by that near-death experience a few days earlier, though." She flicked the longer end of her newly shorn hair, but Pix caught the way her hand hesitated before it found the correct length, read in between the lines the anxiousness that belied that bright smile. He decided to let it go for now. She'd bring it up if she wanted to.

"Yeah, fair," said Fwhip. Either he hadn't caught onto the little details yet, or he was just ignoring them. "Oh! We found a name for the bird. Their name is now Ember."

"Ember, huh?" asked Gem, leaning to the side to catch a glimpse of the little bird hopping about. With a squawk, it took off, passing right by her head and out into the blazing gold evening. She let out a small laugh, strangely brittle and cold against the warm air of the inside of the barn. "I don't think they want to stick around much."

"They're a wild bird," said Fwhip with a shrug. "There's not a lot of food around here, not sure you've noticed. They'll be back for more seeds, probably."

"Oh, I've definitely noticed," said Gem, leaning back and crossing one leg over the better. "We were out searching for any sort of food for *hours*. Luckily, I found a cow." She patted the bag beside her.

"Nice," said Fwhip. "Steak for dinner again then, I guess?"

"Yep," said Gem brightly. "And for you, brother mine, I'll let you cook it." Something about the way she said those words, the inflection, the tightness in her shoulders and the perfect anxious

posture in her spine, made Pix look at her a little bit closer. Her smile faltered a little as she looked over at him and noticed him looking.

"Gem," he said slowly, "are you sure you're alright?"

Her mouth opened slightly as she processed the question, then set into a hardened line. "Yes, I am," she said, slightly stiffly. "Why do you ask?"

Pix shrugged. "You just seemed a little... tense," he said, casting around for good descriptors.

"Abnormal, for severe lack of a better term."

"Abnormal?" asked Gem, mock confused. Even from across the fire, Pix could feel the coldness of her stare. (He had some pretty good death glares himself. He just never used them because he never had to, including now.)

"That wasn't the kindest word I could have said there," he said with a slight inclination of the head. "I'm sorry."

"*Abnormal?*" asked Gem again. She laughed without humor, something strange stirring in the back of her voice. "Actually, I think I'm the most normal one here."

(Oh, bless her little heart.)

Fwhip glanced over at Pix, mouth hanging slightly open. He looked back at his sister. "You really think so?" He probably meant to sound genuine, but his tone came off as slightly incredulous, and Gem's eyebrows raised minutely.

"Yep," she said.

Pix decided (wisely) to intervene before this railroad accident turned into a bona fide trainwreck.

"Maybe we should focus on something else," he said.

"Oh, good idea," said Gem. She stood up way too fast. "I'm going to sleep. It's been a really long day."

She walked off before Pix or Fwhip could get a word in, and Fwhip just stared after her with his jaw pointing open before looking back at Pix.

"We need to talk with her," he said under his breath, glancing back her way. "Something's up."

"I wholeheartedly agree," said Pix, speaking quietly as well. "Thankfully, I came to that agreement about three days before you did."

Fwhip's eyebrows furrowed, and Pix just shrugged apologetically as he went on. "I didn't mean that as an insult," he said awkwardly. "Genuinely. You've just been pretty busy, and I've had a lot of time to pick up on cues and stuff."

Fwhip nodded. "That makes sense," he says. "I'm horrible when it comes to that sort of stuff." He rubbed the back of his neck as he continued. "Like two nights ago, for example. And a lot of times before that."

Pix caught that he was trying to make an apology, and smiled a bit as he sat back up and stretched. "It's okay," he said reassuringly as Fwhip looked back up. "I got what you meant."

"Okay, good," said Fwhip, relieved.

"Subject change," said Pix as he got up and walked over towards the bag of raw meat. "Obviously, I want to actually get some sleep tonight, but do you want to at least get some of this cooking? We can keep an eye on it."

"Oh, hell yeah," said Fwhip, walking over. "Now, where's that bag that has the cooking stuff in it..."

The next morning, Gem had everything packed up and ready to go before Fwhip and Pix were even awake enough to confront her. Pix sat up, rubbing his eyes, and next to him, Fwhip quickly sat up from where he was leaning on Pixl's shoulder, untangled himself from the blankets and stumble-ran to the open wall on the far end. By the time Pix had made his way up there (with the reluctant help of some LOUDLY protesting knees), Gem had already mounted Hyacinth and was about to boot her into the air when Fwhip walked up.

"Gem," he said. She pointedly ignored him. "*Gem*."

"It's not about-" he said, waving one hand towards the barn- "that. I just wanted to let you know that I noticed yesterday that the cicadas weren't here. It's the time of year for summer." He sighed, and Gem looked down, flinty expression turning to something softer, something almost just like pity. "That's it. That's all I wanted to say."

He walked over to Odysseus and hopped up into the saddle silently. Pix followed, looking sideways to maybe catch Gem's eye, but she was already high in the air. They took off with little noise. Gem was far ahead of them, and Pix suspected that she wouldn't let them get much closer before picking up speed again.

Pixl didn't often look down while in the air, but he made a quick exception this one time to glance at the bones of the village they'd left behind, the decaying wheat fields, the faded dyes of the shop roofs that they hadn't even had time to explore. Time was pressing, after all.

He just wished that it would stop pressing on his chest specifically.

They flew on.

Chapter End Notes

Gem, girl, maybe you shouldn't have said that...

This chapter was drafted over two weeks and also over two mediums! A large amount of the middle portion of it (the bird naming bit) was drafted using our typewriter and also by hand, the rest was done digitally. We made a Tumblr post showing the front and back of the two pages we wrote and annotated that bit of the fic on, which you can find [here!](#) :D

ALSO I JUST REMEMBERED I FORGOT A FEW THINGS:

1. The Bird Did In Fact Go With Them. Fwhip put him in a little bag with some food and while it might not be the most ethical way to transport a creature like that, he didn't exactly have a large amount of options to choose from either.
2. Yeah. It's May now. I forgot to add in the bit where I'm timeblind as fuck, but that goes here now. There's your canon explanation for that. I just forgot that winter wasn't

one long horrible dark month of eternal torture and went "yeah sure it's only been 3 months that makes sense" asksjdjabdabdbbsb

Secrets.

Chapter Summary

Some planning and rerouting is needed for the next leg of the journey. Pixl is a bit nervous about it. And Gem... well, it's nothing I can explain succinctly.

Or,

Pixl takes the reins. Also, Gem has a quite mortifying conversation and subsequent realization about herself.

(Buckle in, folks. This is a long one.)

Chapter Notes

"a husband or child can be replaced
but who can grow me a new brother"

- Anne Carson, *Antigonick*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Miss" is an English word that, depending on the context, means to fail to hit, experience a lack of, or fail to find. Its origin lies in the Old English word "missa," which means to miss a mark or escape someone's notice. Over the centuries, the meaning changed to include several more nuances- for example, failing to note or observe, or failing to reach or attain what one wants. By around the 12th century, the word also included this quite vague description: the sense of "perceiving with regret the absence or loss of (something or someone)".

Given these definitions, and after examining the context that one might use them in, it would not be too much of a stretch to say that Gem missed her brother, with all of the definitions listed here, with all that implies.

Grieving is a no-strings-attached process, because grief is not an exterior factor, able to be cut off with scissors. It does not hang from the heart on fishing line like the moon does in low-budget play productions sometimes. It lives within. It cannot be separated.

You cannot miss grief. You can miss the point of it, certainly, or even the meaning, but not the thing itself. You can also ignore and repress it.

(I think you see where I'm going here.)

See, Gem is a case study in the perfect older sister with all of the perfectionism that entails. She ran from the pressure and thought she had escaped, but really she kept some very important lessons that she was taught growing up: number one, failure is not an option. Full stop. Number two, weakness is punished. If they see you cry, they WILL pounce on you. Number three is if you dare

not follow any of these lessons, you'll be taught to. Any deviation will hurt less than just following them, so don't even try.

(Important note: I am in no way saying that these lessons are true. I am just repeating what she was taught.)

What you get is a scared girl who, being taught incessantly that the world is always trying to kill you, is always on edge. Always looking for the next threat. No time to process deeper issues, they're coming for me.

(Nobody is coming for her except for her.)

Oh, Gem never *intended* to keep everything from Pixl and Fwhip. She wanted to explain everything, she really did. But catching the grief and throwing it into the back of her mind where it slowly increased in size and pressure was muscle memory at this point. She couldn't help it.

How do you take down a rhinoceros that grows the more you try to defeat it alone, when you've been keeping it in a tiny box your entire life, hiding it from everyone?

To continue the metaphor, at this point, the rhinoceros has been folded into seven layers of subconscious "don't think about it". This is not healthy for the rhinoceros or its environment. If the rhinoceros is not allowed out of its box, then it will grow more and more violent until it either finds a crack in the walls or just busts through on its own.

You can see now why she's been avoiding the subject for so long.

The day that zombie came two millimeters from slicing her neck open and chopped off her braid instead, two things happened. Firstly, Fwhip took it down and saved her without a second thought, even though they had just had a bitter argument. Secondly, her mind took the incident as a trigger to suddenly hit her with a wave of everything she'd been trying to forget recently. (It was going to happen eventually. She was thinking about it already, and with the significance that having your hair cut short carried... yeah.)

So, she did what any reasonable person in that situation would do and wandered, half-asleep, in a sudden and thick haze that held her prisoner for five whole days. Feet barely on the ground, she drifted from place to place like an uprooted spirit, or perhaps a feather drifting loosely on the wind.

But what was this grief that held her in such strict rapport? The answer is difficult. There are several things that feed into this, but I shall focus on the one event that really started the rhinoceros pacing in its cage.

She stumbled down a rubble-strewn street, usually pristine boots now dusty and stained, zigzagging from one side of the road to the other. The world had just ended, and she found herself on the other side of the line.

She did not particularly care right now. She had more pressing matters on her mind.

Upraising rocks and kicking aside rubble, prying up stones from the dirt, lifting splintered and shattered wooden beams: all the signs of someone desperately looking for something. This is the one time she would have covered her tracks, if she could have.

(If there was anyone left to find them.)

(That's not the point.)

"Where is he?" she asked nobody in particular, running faster down the street and staring at a dead end, dread blooming in her chest, the exact size and shape of a wither rose. "Where. Is. He."

"Gem, come on," called Fwhip from the other end of the (rather short) street. His voice was hoarse, infinitely weary, and raw with something that might have been tears. He stood (unsteadily) on his own two feet. "We need to go."

"Two more minutes," said Gem, turning around frantically. "Just- I don't know where he *is*! This place is so big!"

"We need to *go*," repeated Fwhip, more urgently this time. He swayed slightly on his feet and reached out, grabbing onto Odysseus' wing for stability. The ground tremored, and more bricks shook loose from their foundations, utterly rent. Gem lost her balance and fell to her knees, but stubbornly stood up shakily again.

"It's not safe here!" yelled Fwhip. "Come on!"

"I can't just leave him behind without even looking for him," Gem shouted back, overturning piles of rocks with her hands again. (They were starting to bleed. She didn't care about that either.)

"Listen, this place is huge," said Fwhip. He sighed, almost silently at this distance. "He might not even *be* here. He could be anywhere."

She continued scrabbling amongst the wreckage like a lost dog. If she just kept going, she'd find him, she could tune out her other brother, if she just kept trying she would be fine-

"You know what? He's most likely dead."

Fires hissed in the rafters, sounding much like angry cats. The wind blew a sour and acrid smoke across their faces. It was not perfectly still, but it was damn close to it- the world was holding its breath, and all hell with it.

Gem looked up silently and walked up to him, and Fwhip flinched a little at the look on her face. "How can you say that," she said in a furious undertone, "when he *wa- is-* your brother too? You haven't helped me look at all. How *dare* you give up so fast."

"Gem, I literally got blown up," said Fwhip. He gestured down to himself. "I couldn't walk three feet by myself. And anyways, you just admitted it too." He sighed, too tired to care about the fury building behind Gem's eyes. "I'm tired, okay. I'm sorry. Just let it go. Please."

Something in his voice made Gem step back a little. She looked behind her, at all the wreckage that contained ghosts unmeasured. How many bodies lay under those fallen buildings? How many of the living would die within the hour without intervention?

How many of them were Sausage?

She walked over to Hyacinth, tears building in her eyes, looked over to make sure Fwhip was solidly atop Odysseus, and rose into the air, one brother following close behind and the other one left open ended with ellipses and a question mark somewhere below. She forced it out of her mind. She would do that after they were safe, after they got out.

Her hands worked the reins smoothly, confidently. The sky above was darkening with the

approach of dusk, and behind her, she could hear the flap of twin wings following behind hers.

Gem needed the time to think, alone. Her mind was finally clear of the fog that had plagued it, and she was relieved that it had happened here, instead of a week ahead. She would need all of her focus for the coming journey. They were close.

For the past six or so hours, she had been planning responses for a myriad of questions that likely she would never get asked. Her plan was simple: she wasn't going to bring it up unless one of the boys did. They obviously knew she'd been acting strange. Gem didn't think she was acting *too* strange, but then again, what did she know? If they asked what was going on with her, she'd just shrug and say it, out loud, as casually as she could. Everything would be fixed. Everything would be fine.

Just one problem: even the *thought* of telling the two what had been weighing on her mind so heavily sent a wave of deeply seated fear and panic through her.

Because see, the thing was this: in her mind, Gem was the bona-fide leader of the group. Pix clearly had something going on, but as long as it wasn't affecting him like it had yesterday, he was probably fine. Fwhip was just Fwhip, except for a LOT more cynical and sulky than usual. But Gem? She was the one who got stuff done. She was the one who got everything packed and put seals on the food so they wouldn't go bad and went hunting most of the time. And she'd been slacking bad for the past few days.

They'd go down there. She'd apologize. Everything would be perfectly fine.

As the sun set, the grass of the savannah became darker and greyer, as if losing their life for the evening. The clouds in the sky formed a halo around the half-moon watching sentinel now that her sister was resting; it almost looked like a half lidded eye. Gem looked up and wondered what she saw.

They landed on a flat-ish section of ground, unpacked the bags, stumbled around a little. Flint struck a rock and a spark was caught amongst logs; the cardinal was let out of their bag and immediately took to the skies, chittering. Odysseus eyed it with interest.

"So," said Fwhip with folded arms as Gem approached him. "Are you still not talking to either of us, or have you changed your mind?"

Right. He was still mad about earlier. Of course he was. Gem figured she *had* been rude and more than somewhat incomprehensible, but did it really warrant all this hostility? Really. She opened her mouth to poke at him about it, but a completely different set of words came tumbling out of her mouth. "I'm sorry."

Fwhip raised an eyebrow, and she took a deep breath. What was she *doing*? This went against everything she had planned. But if she said she didn't mean it, well, she couldn't just DO that.

Gem did the smart thing and ran with it.

"I have been in a really weird place the past few days," she said with an exhale. "Thinking about some stuff."

"That doesn't excuse it," said Fwhip, arms folded. Behind him, Pixl glanced up, then back down at the quickly setting logs.

"I know," she said. "But I can explain."

What happened to the plan of keeping her pretty mouth shut until someone brought something up?

(Your brain discarded it because it knew what it really needed.)

"Okay, then," said Fwhip, walking over to the fire and taking a seat on the ground. "I'm not going to let you evade this one. You've been acting weirder than usual lately and we want to know what's up."

Gem paused momentarily on her way to the fireside. "Weirder than *usual*?"

Fwhip and Pixl exchanged a glance, and she raised her hands in surrender. "Okay. Fair." She sat down, intentionally sitting directly opposite from Fwhip so that his face was obscured by the fire.

"Nope, closer to me," said Fwhip. "You're not hiding from me."

"Okay," said Gem, scooting closer. "So... okay. Who's making dinner?"

Fwhip scoffed, but Pix just reached for a bag beside him. "We cooked some meat last night while you were asleep," he said. "I'll divvy it up between us. Go on."

"Yeah," said Fwhip. "Go on."

Gem blinked a little, but went tentatively forwards with the only thing that came to mind. "Okay, I'm sorry for saying I'm more normal than you two. That was mean."

"And also untrue," said Fwhip.

"If you want anything out of me, you're going to have to be nice," said Gem, folding her arms. "I don't even know what you're trying to figure out here. I apologized."

"Well, not for everything," said Fwhip. "There was that time you snapped at me for being obsessed with the past. And then that time you shouted at me in the rain and almost got yourself killed. I saved you from that, by the way. You didn't even say thank you."

"Steak," said Pix, handing her and Fwhip each a cut.

"Thanks," said Fwhip, not even bothering to use a fork on it and just ripping a chunk off with his teeth. "Aw, man! It's cold!"

"That's just what happens when you don't have access to an oven," said Pixl placidly, cutting a bite-sized square for himself.

"Thank you for saving me," said Gem.

"You're welcome," said Fwhip. "Go on."

"And sorry for shouting at you."

"Jury's still out on that one," said Fwhip. He took another bite. "Anyways, you said you'd explain. Explain."

Gem sat there, mind furiously whirling while she ate her steak. She had no idea why she had said that. She couldn't explain. Hell, she didn't even know *what* she was supposed to explain! Hadn't she already explained it all already?

"Could you... elaborate, maybe?" she asked, looking directly into the fire to avoid eye contact.

Fwhip laughed, but the sound was more a noise of disbelief than a proper laugh. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see him lean back a little. "Listen, okay," he said once he had sat back down properly again. "We know you're hiding something."

Gem looked over at Pix for help, but he was busy eating. She looked at her brother, who was staring her down intently, not wasting a moment on getting to the bottom of this.

Unfortunately for Gem, she didn't even know what "this" was.

The wind made the faintest noise in the grass as it blew, and above, cataclysms of galaxies spiraled across the great inky canvas of night sky, eternally watching, eternally silent. Ember the cardinal chattered somewhere nearby, and Odysseus' tail flicked as his eyes followed their path: whether out of plain curiosity or something more sinister, only they knew.

Gem looked back at her brother and, already mentally preparing herself for the backlash, said: "I... am?"

There was dead silence for a blissful period of three seconds as both of the boys stared at her. Then Fwhip calmly (read: with suppressed rage and frustration) stood up, turned around, and walked into the night.

Gem just stared, watching him go. On the other side of the fire, Pix let out a deep sigh.

She looked at him. "I promise I'm being serious. I had no idea."

"I know, and that's the problem," said Pix with another, smaller sigh. He took another bite of steak. "I don't know how to say this gently, but you're obviously ignoring something that's bothering you and keeping it from yourself and us."

"Okay," said Gem, still trying her best to understand. "And you know this... how? I'm sorry. I just genuinely don't know what's going on here."

"I can tell," said Pix, getting to his feet. "Be right back. I never do this, but I'm going to go tell Fwhip that you genuinely ARE this oblivious because there is *zero* way that he's ever going to believe you otherwise."

Gem just stared at him as he retreated into the shadows as well, feeling utterly confused, more than mildly hurt, and a little bit scared. What did they know about her- what could they *possibly* know about her that she didn't know about herself?

(A lot. The answer is a lot.)

She sat there in silence as she finished her steak, trying to look over every possible reason for this happening. She'd apologized for what she'd said earlier and for snapping at Fwhip. She'd explained why she'd been so strange the past week. That had to be everything, but still, she was missing *something* apparently.

One of the things that Gem had always hated the most was being proved wrong on topics she knew a lot about. This also applied here.

Pix came back to the fire, picking up the small, thick plate he had his steak on alongside his knife and fork. "Fwhip's coming back here for now, since he really doesn't want to be left in the dark," he said.

"Oh, okay," said Gem, standing up as well. "Does that mean we should-"

"Move, yeah."

They walked to the top of the hill, a short hike nearby, and sat with their backs to the fire. They sipped water. They watched the moon rise.

Pix was silent as he chewed, obviously deep in thought.

"Are you mad at me?" asked Gem.

"What? Oh, no. Sands, no. I'm just trying to figure out what I'm going to say," said Pix, coming out of his silent spell with a small laugh. "If you haven't noticed already, none of us in this group are exactly licensed therapists. Usually I don't intervene, but also if I didn't then Fwhip would be talking shit about you behind my back, and I don't think I'd be able to take much of that before deciding that wandering for another eight years would be the kinder option."

"I thought you didn't swear," said Gem.

"I've loosened up a little over the past decade or so," said Pix with a small shrug. He said it casually enough, but there was a small undertone of embarrassment that made Gem think that she wasn't the only one hiding something either. They weren't sitting here right now to get at the root of *that* particular can of worms, though.

"So," she started slowly and awkwardly. "What do you think has been going on?"

"Well, for starters, you've been pretty violent when accused of not being perfectly fine, which you're not, by the way," said Pix conversationally, in the same tone that one would use when discussing flavors of tea. "You've also been accusing Fwhip pretty heavily of being fixated on the past, which from what I can tell isn't accurate at all. He's pretty miffed about that, by the way. I don't think he thinks your apology quite does it."

Gem just sat there, mouth slightly agape as he continued. "And your voice goes all strange when you mention Sausage. You mentioned when I showed up that you and Fwhip visited the Grimlands and couldn't find him." He looked over, a faint smile playing at his lips in response to her expression. "Is that enough explanation for you?"

Gem blinked a couple times. "Wow, okay," she said, face going red. "I didn't realize that. Okay. I didn't even know you were picking up on that."

"I listen to and pay attention to things a lot, yes," said Pix. "That's what my ears and my brain are for."

She dropped her face into her hands. "Oh my gods. Have I really been *that obvious*?"

"Yeah. You have."

She looked back up at him, giving him a glare that she didn't really feel.

"Listen," said Pix, raising both hands. "You're the one who asked for this conversation. If you'd rather go deal with Fwhip, be my guest."

Gem did not want to deal with Fwhip, so she settled for glaring at the ground instead. She wished she had never asked. She wished she had never slipped. She wished she hadn't been made aware of this huge boiling lake of whatever the fuck this was that lived in the back of her head apparently.

Knowledge is both a blessing and a curse, and she knew now that she could never just ignore this

again.

"You should have just not said anything," she said. "My day was going just fine."

"I'm not quite sure it was," said Pix.

Her face was back in her hands again. "Why is this even any of your business anyways?"

"Because we've been in close quarters together for over eight months," said Pixl. "Also, you'd just spiral and that'd be bad for the rest of us. Your actions affect other people, you know."

"I know," Gem grumbled into her hands. "Any other reason?"

"Well, the food would go bad pretty quickly."

Gem flopped backwards onto the ground and just stared at the sky for lack of better actions to take.

She hated how much sense Pix was making. Hated it. She had thought she was completely bulletproof but here she was, being completely taken out by a few casual observations. It was horrible.

"Okay," she said, arms folded. "Fine. How do I fix.... whatever's going on?"

"Not sure," said Pix with a small shrug. "Everybody's different. I do have some advice, though."

"Do I want your advice?"

"Maybe."

"Pix."

"I'm sorry. I just make jokes at the worst possible times," said Pixl with a small laugh. "Okay. No, seriously though, the best thing to do when you're trying to figure out... whatever is going on with your brain is talk yourself through it out loud."

"But that's embarrassing!" Gem protested.

"Gem," said Pix seriously, looking over at her. "Embarrassment is a social construct. There has been no society left in this world for the past 8 months. You're fine."

(Pixl realized immediately after saying that that all three of them had been a part of some sort of society at one point that only really existed through them now, but he decided not to focus on it. Wise choice.)

"Okay, fine," said Gem, shutting her eyes and rubbing them. "It's just. Gods. Where would I even start?"

From behind them came an annoyed shout: "Are you two done up there?!"

"We're working on it!" Pix yelled back. He sighed as he turned back to the landscape in front of him. "Anyways. You said you couldn't find Sausage. Talk about that."

"I could just leave," said Gem. "I could walk off and never have to talk to you ever again."

"That is an option, yes," said Pix. He sighed. "I know I'm pressing you really hard, and I'm sorry

about that. It's not fun for me either. But this is a necessary evil. You have to trust me when I say that it gets way easier after you get this off your chest the first time. I won't bring it up after this, but if you ever want to talk about it, well..."

His voice trailed off at the end, quietly, awkwardly, and Gem realized just how much effort this was for the both of them. This was the last thing she wanted to do. But if Pixl was doing this intentionally and encouraging her, which he was...

Gem shut her eyes and prayed that the moon would stop looking her way, just this once.

"There just wasn't enough time," she said. (She didn't know it, but Pix was looking at her now with a mixture of sympathy, pity, relief, and also jealousy. That last one seems out of place, until you remember that he had some things he was trying to forget as well.)

(All will be settled in due time. Don't worry.)

Gem paused a moment, afraid she'd somehow said something wrong, but Pix just went "mhm" in a tone that let her know he was listening and wanted her to go on. She continued slowly. "After the explosion happened, he came running for the Cliffs and we had to evacuate. There's one last place I wanted to go before we left, though."

"Mythland?" asked Pix.

"Yes," said Gem, eyes still shut. She sighed. "I know it was wasting precious time, but I ran down every street looking anyways. Checking under rubble, everything. We weren't there for longer than 15 minutes, and he just... wasn't anywhere. It wasn't safe. We had to go."

"And I'm guessing you didn't get the chance to go back, either," said Pix softly.

"We didn't," said Gem. She didn't dare open her eyes. If she did, what would she read in the stars? What would they say to her? Would they condemn her a madwoman, the one diagnosis she had been running from for so long? "He could have been anywhere. I know I could have found him if I'd just looked longer. But I didn't. He might even be here right now." She exhaled, trying to force down the tears rising. "I know you two had your issues. But..."

"But?" Pixl prompted.

Gem sat up and buried her face in her hands again. "What kind of sister would abandon her own brother like that?"

The rhinoceros was out of the box now. Knees pulled to chest, head resting on top of them, Gem thought for a moment that maybe if she curled up small enough she would become invisible. If she just hid, nobody could find her. She didn't even know why she'd want that, but all she knew was that anything would be less painful than this.

Next to her, Pix sat up a little. She could hear the grass crunch. "Gem," he said gently, sympathetically but with infinite concern. "You've been sitting on this for eight months?"

"I left him behind, okay?" Gem said, crossing her legs and angrily wiping the tears coming from her eyes. "That's the big secret. And I've been a dick to you and Fwhip about it and I didn't even realize and now Sausage is probably dead somewhere." She wiped her eyes again, and her nose as well. "I'm not supposed to be doing this! I'm the leader of the group! This isn't supposed to happen!"

"Whoa, back up," said Pixl. "Who said you were the leader here?"

"Well," said Gem, fumbling for an answer, "well... me, I guess. And I think Fwhip mentioned it at one point too."

"Gem," said Pix. "None of us here are qualified to officially 'lead' whatever this is. We're just pulling our weight and trying not to die on a daily basis. That's it. There's no hierarchy here."

"But if there isn't," said Gem, head resting on her hands, "then why have I worked so hard the entire time?"

"Maybe because you were doing all that to distract yourself from this?"

Gem was silent a moment. "...Huh."

"Gem, I am so sorry about all of this."

"Pix?"

"Yeah?"

"I want to explode into a million tiny pieces."

"Considering what you've been through, yeah, that's understandable."

Gem sighed and wiped the last of the moisture from her face. "I should probably go tell Fwhip all this," she said, standing up. "We uh, have a map to go over."

Pixl nodded up at her. "That would be a good idea."

"And Pix?"

"Mhm?"

"I never want to have this conversation again. Ever."

"Thankfully, we shouldn't have to," he said with a smile.

"Oh, and another thing," she said, kneeling down and leaning forwards to give him a hug. "Thank you."

Long, lean arms found her way around her back and squeezed reassuringly. "Of course," said Pixl. "Of course."

Pixl waited a little bit for Gem to go down the hill before he stood up and collected the things they'd brought with them. Gem had a cleaning spell she used on all the plates and cutlery that the three of them used, but she washed them in a river when one was available. Either way, she always liked them in one place.

Not like there was going to be much water where they were headed next.

He sat down next to the bag that held all of their navigation supplies and took out the carefully rolled-up map that they'd been traveling by for the past eight months. Where they'd found him was at the edge of the desert. They'd gone east to the first portal and then back to the northwest.

Gem had been studying some things lately, she'd said. Apparently, she remembered some old tales of a strange door-like light that shone in the far northwest, directly where they were headed. She

only had a vague description of the area around it, but Pix didn't really want to think about that area until her and Fwhip got done talking. He sighed and waited for them to come back, leaning back and staring at the sky.

The stars twinkled on as peacefully as they ever had, oblivious to the calamities that plagued the earth below, and Pix had a sudden wish to be up there instead of way down there, away from the repercussions of his (and everyone here presents') past.

It calmed his heart slightly to know that there were some paragons of beauty, at least, that Xornoth couldn't touch.

He hadn't heard any shouting from Gem and Fwhip, which was good. Hopefully everything was going peacefully over there. (Usually, Pixl preferred to stay out of other peoples' business, but Gem had been headed towards a full-out crisis earlier and desperately needed some sort of intervention. When Fwhip of all people notices you're acting strange, you know something's up.)

He closed his eyes just in time to hear footsteps getting closer and voices approaching.

"...just tell us all this before I was ready to punch you?" Fwhip asked.

"I was preoccupied," said Gem.

"Preoccupied with what?"

"Stuff."

Pix sighed to himself. It could be worse, but it also could be far better. At least they weren't kicking at each other on the ground.

"Pix, you have the map, right?" asked Fwhip. Pixl sat up and, picking it up, handed it over. "Yep."

"Awesome," said Fwhip. "So. Gem. What's the deal here."

"Okay, so, you see this line here?" asked Gem, wasting no time on getting to it. Pixl scooted over to look, with Fwhip on Gem's other side. "That's our course. You know that already."

"Yep," said Fwhip.

"Now in the corner here," she continued, "there's the desert. And I am almost completely certain that the second portal is in here."

Pix felt the first vestiges of dread rise in his stomach, but he nodded anyways. "Right."

"There's a whole bunch of mountain ranges and some really tricky terrain before we get there, though," said Gem. "I'm pretty sure we can only go in one way." Her finger traced into the center of the ranges and tapped. "I have no idea where the portal thing actually is, but I'm pretty sure it's somewhere in here."

"That's a lot," commented Fwhip, looking over.

"Yeah," said Gem. "But here's the thing. I've not visited the desert a lot, specifically never this area. Fwhip, I know you haven't either. Almost as soon as we pass the border, we'll basically be flying blind."

Pixl, knowing what was to come, leaned down and rested his face heavily in his hands.

He knew this was coming. His eyes had been skipping over this corner of the map for a while. He knew they'd come back here eventually, and in fact, he'd heard of the door Gem had mentioned and even knew the location.

(Once, during his wanderings, he had stumbled upon a high mountain range and spent the next three days climbing one brutal summit, collapsing in a cave near the top. He looked out over the valley and saw a small oasis on one side and, in the distance, a small white-blue light. He departed the next day, thinking the light was a sign of human habitation. Besides, to his own eyes, he had deserved neither the water the oasis offered nor the solace of a roof.)

"Pix?" asked Fwhip with concern. "You okay over there, buddy?"

"I-" said Pixl, then paused. He sat up wearily. "No. But it's not something I can explain right now." He paused. "I'll tell you when we reach the border. But the important part is," he said, leaning back over the map again, "I know where this is. In fact, I've been there."

"Wait, you do?" asked Gem. "Is the portal there?"

"I don't know," said Pixl, eyes scanning the page. "But there's some old wives tales from that region that also mention an ethereal door. Something that specific probably isn't a coincidence. But yeah." He took a deep breath. "I can get us there."

"Well, that's great!" said Fwhip, grinning. His smile faded a little. "How is that going to work, though? Are you going to tell us where to go, or...?"

Gem leaned to the side to look at Odysseus and Hyacinth a few meters away, asleep. "I have an idea."

"Dude, there's no way," said Fwhip. "He hasn't even- Pixl, have you ever flown anything before?? Let alone a dragon."

Despite himself, Pixl couldn't help himself from grinning like a little kid. "It can't be *that* different from riding a camel," he said.

IT WAS EXTREMELY DIFFERENT FROM RIDING A CAMEL.

"Is there any way I can make him slow down?" he shouted to Fwhip behind him, who was clinging on for dear life.

Below them, the moon-studded landscape of rolling hills dappled with silver and the hints of a mountain range faintly darker than the sky around it on the horizon. Pixl got the feeling that he would enjoy the view much more if he wasn't actively in fight-or-flight mode, which considering that he couldn't fight a dragon that was already flying 100 feet in the air, was all things considered a pretty stupid thing for his brain to do.

"Pull on the reins," said Fwhip, sounding absolutely terrified. "Not hard. DO NOT PULL THEM HARD. THE DRAGON WILL GO UP AND WE WILL FALL OFF."

Pixl tugged (gently) on the reins, and Odysseus grunted once and lowered the pace from "the roadrunner from that one animated show" to "freight train running at medium speed". It was still terrifyingly fast, but not as bad. (Key word here: as.)

"Okay," said Fwhip, straining to look over his shoulder. "Good. Everything after that is pretty easy. Tug left to make him go left, right to make him go right, and you can flick the reins to make him go

faster, although I'd recommend-"

Pix flicked the reins and banked hard to the right.

"-*not doing that right now*," said Fwhip through gritted teeth, voice tensing up and forcibly relaxing again.

"Little bit harder than riding a camel, yeah," said Pix, whose anxiety had calmed down considerably more now. He took a look around. The view from up here really was stunning, although the constant wind blowing into his eyes was a little bit hard to get used to. "Fwhip, be honest. You basically sat me on a dragon and said I got to drive it. You're giving me instructions on how to fly this thing. What did you expect me to do, not follow them immediately?"

"I just thought you'd be more careful about it," grumbled Fwhip.

Pix glanced over his shoulder. "Really?" he asked. "That coming from you?"

Fwhip rolled his eyes, and Pix smiled again as he turned back to the front.

"Definitely a lot to get used to, but this was way easier than I expected," he commented. "How do I go down?"

"Please tell me you won't take us into a nosedive immediately. I will piss my pants."

"Do you lean forwards or something?" asked Pixl, trying it out.

"Yes, y- AAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

You can probably figured out what happened after that. Don't worry, everyone was fine, but Pix did walk out of there with a few leaves in his hair and both boys sported bruises. Odysseus huffed as he lay back down to sleep, and Ember flew over to peck at some seeds that Gem had laid out.

"So, how'd it... go?" she asked, looking up and taking note of the singular twig in Pixl's beard and the red mark that Fwhip's (now slightly cracked) goggles had left on his forehead from the impact."

"Absolutely horrible," grumbled Fwhip.

"Pretty well, actually," said Pixl at the exact same time.

"Well, glad you're both okay," said Gem. "So, Pix, are you flying us over tomorrow or...?"

"I think I should have a bit more practice before going straight in, especially for long distances," said Pix with a glance at Fwhip, who sighed with relief. Now that he was back on the ground, he remembered exactly where he was going, and his muscles seemed to get wearier in protest as if they knew where they were going back to soon. "I'm signing off early. I need to get some rest before we enter the drylands."

"Yeah, me too," said Fwhip with a yawn and a wince as he stretched. "Need a good solid eight hours to recover from that flight."

"Well, goodnight then," said Gem, holding out more seeds for Ember to peck at.

"Did the conversation go okay?" Pix asked her in a low voice, bending down a little.

"Yep," said Gem, looking over at him with a smile. "We got it figured out, no small part with help

from you."

Pix shrugged. "It was the least I could do," he said.

"Well, you did a pretty good job," said Gem. "Have a good sleep."

"You too," said Pixl, standing up and turning away from the fire.

"And hey, Pixl?"

"Yes?" he asked, turning around."

Gem looked up at him with an emotion he could not quite place. "Remember that you can talk to us too."

"I will," he said, and with a slight inclination of the head he walked off to prepare himself for the morning, and what sunlight would bring.

Chapter End Notes

haha whoops my finger slipped <- just broke his personal record for longest standalone chapter they've ever written and did it in just under two days to boot. I have autism

anyways, i don't really have any things to tack onto the end of this one. hope all the effort i put into it was worth it. thank y'all for sticking around <3

An Introduction to the Lone and Level Sands

Chapter Summary

They reach the border of the desert. Pix is acutely aware of all that entails.

Or,

There is the sudden (but not wholly unexpected) return of an all-too-familiar silence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

If you want a scene painted in fresh syllables and grammar sorted by weight, well, folks here's your chance.

They flew. They drifted, almost imperceptibly above the earth, imperceptible not because of their size or opacity but because there was almost nothing around to take note. Black wings against haze-white-blue sky, the monolithian flaps of stifling and lazy late-spring air: here come the heralds.

This ruined landscape has been exhausted of almost all of its meaningful descriptions: you know the savannah. You know stunted trees weatherworn to the right from decades possibly centuries of monsoon-dry gales. You know the heat echoing off of the grass. I could give you hex codes. I could give you the molecular chemistry of the rocks and their amiable cousins the boulders littering the ground forever, as long as forever lasts in this world. I could give you the binomial nomenclature of the dragons and their mounts, explain the DNA in excruciating detail.

Those details would trip over themselves and unfortunately cause quite the mess quite quickly, though, so I am left with the most banal of options, the one I've been using this whole time: where they've been and where they're headed.

You should have a decent idea of where these three (five? six? i'd ask them if i could if the animals included in the journey make a full headcount here) have been, this far into the roadtrip. Grievances, deaths eclipsed by question marks, snowy winters spent side by side in stone halls decades past when the mother was still there. Sand embedding itself into the bottom of feet soles. Demons. Gods. Humans.

(If this passage veers a little too close to the vague and dances too strongly with the poetic, well, I'm sorry. There's only so many alliterations and allusions and wandering rambling interludes that one can fit into a single story, and each one counts.)

This shattered (wrongly) desaturated (wrongly) savannah blended, as one would do with a fine-haired fine-tuned brush into a brittle, gritty, half-grass half-desert bastardland with one half already in the destitute and the other half desperately clinging onto life. Flying over it from above, the transition was clear to see, if not as tidy as an artist would have preferred it. Lean over the side, dip down close. Brush the grass with your fingers. Circle, land, hear the crunch of gritty dusted stone under your boots and sandals.

That is what Gem, Fwhip, and Pixl did, anyways. Others may have chosen different paths.

Pix stood there facing the desert as the other two wandered around a little, feeling for themselves the sand particles in between the blades of grass. He didn't need to poke around for evidence, didn't need to taste and test the earth underfoot for signs and directions. He knew this place. Knew what it held. He didn't even realize he was holding his hands in a fist until Fwhip noticed and walked over, concerned.

(Here's a poem for you, the type that writes itself: a man stands still-silent filled with a boiling ocean a million degrees below zero. wind blowing little bits of his soul behind him for anyone who bothers to look. sun shining in front of him casting his silhouette in ebony midnight black every overly descriptive shade of paint you can find at a craft store. the desert is not lifeless and neither is he which is where his foolproof plan to drip silently out of life and memory goes wrong and the slag of it gets pinned like a butterfly to a page. this page. i'd call it cruel if i wasn't the ink myself)

"You good?" Fwhip asked.

(The question was casual. The tone was not. He's good at that sort of strange juxtaposition, if you haven't picked up on that already.)

Pix took a breath, eyes not leaving the jagged horizon just yet. "Yeah," he lied, forcing the tension out of his shoulders. "Just preparing."

"Oh, okay," said Fwhip, not sounding entirely convinced. In the silence that choked the air, Pixl could hear him put it aside with an internal shrug. "I know you said you'd explain when we hit the border, but you can wait if you need."

"I might need a few minutes, but that's it," said Pixl, rubbing his eyes. Across his vision, memories danced by in fleeting snapshots- the vision that always heralded the loud part of his nightmares, the noise that followed him eternally till morning. Blinding sun and eternal sand and horribly burning feet. Flesh, half-rotted off the bone, horrible to the taste. Shivering under sun and moon. Grief, loathing, shame, and more grief.

Here he stood again.

Really, the desert was beautiful. It was almost a shame that Pixl had to hate this place out of principle, if nothing else.

"So, we're here now," said Gem, walking up beside the two of them, hands on her hips. She held the uneasy but determined confidence of someone who had just discovered that their soul went so much infinitely deeper than they had ever thought before.

"Yep," said Fwhip, who held the confidence of someone at this point in time was just Fwhip.

Pixl was silent.

"Wait, there's plants in there," said Fwhip, shading his eyes and squinting into the sand and the sun and the afternoon.

"There is!" said Pix, mind still mostly on the journey ahead. "This is the edge of the desert, remember. It gets drier the further we go in. But most of the plants here are edible except for when they're not, and there's a lot of rabbits around." He paused. "Well, there were the last time I was in an area around here."

"How long ago was that?" asked Gem.

"I have no idea," Pixl said. "Two, three years?"

(Time tends to lose all meaning and direction when you're wandering around dead.)

"Is there much food anywhere else?"

"Again, depends. Most of the time, it's incredibly scarce."

"We're going to have to stock up, then," said Gem, obviously planning for the journey ahead already.

"So, do we go in, or...?" asked Fwhip.

"We wait until night to travel," said Pixl. "Sleep during the day. Neither are very safe, but the sand is cooler at night." He laughed oddly darkly, half to himself. "I've traveled during both. Trust me, I'd know."

"Oh, okay, good to know," said Fwhip, half-absently. He swiveled around to look at Pixl suspiciously. "Wait."

Pixl just raised an eyebrow, anticipating his question. "Fwhip, I was out there for eight years."

"Yeah, but..." said Fwhip, scrambling futilely for words, "dude, that doesn't mean- please don't tell me you intentionally went out there during the day knowing that it was really, really hot and was going to hurt your feet."

Pixl did not respond.

"Oh my *gods*," said Fwhip.

"Pixl," said Gem, turning to face him as well with two hands on her hips. "You said you'd give us an explanation about what happened in here as soon as we got to the border. This is a good time to explain."

"First off, I never said that," said Pixl. "And also, well, you two don't exactly need to..." He sighed. "Listen. All you need to know is that whatever I did to land myself in the open desert, it meant that I deserved the time."

"*Eight years?*"

"Every second of it."

They were both studying him intently now, four sets of invisible lasers boring right into his skull. If he could just tell what was going on inside their minds- no, he knew. There was skepticism. That for sure. And quite possibly disgust. They deserved the truth of course, the both of them. But he wasn't worthy of telling them.

"Pix, buddy," started Fwhip slowly, "I don't think there's *anything* you could have done that could have justified you being out here alone for so long."

"Oh, trust me," said Pixl, quite confidently. Oh, if only they knew. "There is." He glanced backwards to where the bags were sitting in a pile. "I'm going to go get some sleep, and I'd suggest you do as well. The nights are short here." And with that, he walked off.

Fwhip just stared after Pixl as he walked off, and from the way Gem was silent beside him, he

could tell that she was too.

"That's..." he started, not quite sure how to describe it.

"Concerning," suggested Gem. "Really, really concerning."

"Yeah," said Fwhip, watching him flop besides a pile of bags and curl up, appearing to fall asleep almost instantly. "What does he mean by 'deserving his time' or whatever he said?"

"I have no idea," said Gem thoughtfully. "It's definitely not good, though."

"Yeah," said Fwhip, looking behind him at the desert. "Pix... Pixl's a good man. I don't think there's anything he could have done to warrant... that."

"Yeah," said Gem, concerned. "Do you think we should keep an eye on him?"

"Absolutely," said Fwhip. "I mean, there's probably a reason he came out of the desert looking like he did." He shot another uneasy glance over his shoulder. "Maybe it was a cougar or something."

"Cougars don't live in deserts, Fwhip."

"Whatever. Better than the alternative."

"Which is?"

Fwhip kept looking at the pile of bags, dragons, and Pixl that lay a little ways in front of him, not answering. He didn't want to talk about the alternative, which was that the mangled wreck his old friend had been was the product of an unusually harsh climate and not...

"Pix is right," he said, walking forwards. "We should all get a nap. Sun sets in like, three hours."

Pixl had gone quiet, which was making Fwhip feel... uneasy, to say the least.

He had been silent while waking and packing. He had been silent as he mounted Odysseus, and silent as he guided the dragon into the sky, Fwhip sitting behind him. Now, around 30 minutes into the flight, he still hadn't given any advice on what plants were edible, or where they'd be landing, or anything, when at least he'd commented on some neat bit of the landscape before they'd reached the border.

Even his body language spoke of some silent apprehension or fear: shoulders tense, the set of his jaw clear even from this angle, hands keeping a blue-veined vise grip on the reins.

Fwhip desperately hoped that Pix was just focusing hard on the journey ahead, but something in his nervous system told him that wasn't the case.

He leaned forwards a little, shifted in his seat to be a little more comfortable. "Pixl, are you alright?"

There was no response past the stiffening of his friend's posture even further.

"Okay," said Fwhip. "Fair. Is it okay if I at least hold on to you? It's getting a little bit wobbly back there."

Pix paused a moment before nodding minutely. Fwhip leaned forwards slightly and wrapped his arms around his waist slowly, just in case Pix changed his mind. Pix tensed a little, and Fwhip

drew his arms back, but Pix just sighed and leaned backwards, letting Fwhip hold on to him.

The silver-edged landscape that scudded by below was beautiful in the way that a graveyard was beautiful. There were little shrubs that dotted the ground alongside boulders and rocks, as well as the occasional small tree that seemed more an alien life-form in this freezing lighting than a residing organism of Earth.

Fwhip figured that the whole graveyard vibe was probably because there were no animals visible down there- which made complete sense, considering the three of them were riding two huge-ass dragons -but still, it was a bit unsettling.

He had to sit up straighter and strain a bit to reach, but he looked around a bit before resting his chin on Pixl's shoulder. The horizon was pretty easily visible, mountain ranges clipping into the starfields above, but beyond that, who knew what lay? Fwhip shut his eyes and tried to get comfortable. Pix had mentioned sleeping during the day, but it'd take him a minute to get used to that, and he figured he'd need the rest anyways.

Fwhip sighed silently, the rhythmic flap of Odysseus' wings lulling his mind into a wandering state.

No person ever remembers falling asleep, and Fwhip in this case was no exception.

He woke up an unknown amount of time later to Odysseus banking to land and a gentle light shining through his closed eyelids. He sat up a little, back and chin sore, and rubbed his drooping eyes as Odysseus landed neatly on the sand in between some shrubs.

To the left of them, not too far, was a wall of stone rising roughly from the soft grain of the sand around them. It curved towards the front of them, and in its face were several large-ish holes, weathered straight through the rock by eons of wind and the occasional rainstorm.

"We need to get into one of those soon," said Pixl, pointing towards one of the holes in the rockface. "It gets really hot really, really fast out here."

Fwhip dismounted, yawned, and stretched, trying to shake his body awake before climbing an entire cliff face. Pix had already grabbed a couple of bags himself and let Ember the cardinal out of theirs. They fluttered over to Fwhip's shoulder, chirping for food, and he gently petted their head while grabbing some bags himself. "You'll get some in a minute," he said. "Just need to get inside first."

"Are you really talking to that bird?" asked Gem. "You know they can't understand you, right?"

"They don't need to," said Fwhip. "Also, you talk to the dragons as well." Ember nipped at his ear, and Fwhip leaned sideways to avoid them. "Ow, fuck!"

"Guys, come on," said Pixl urgently, already scrambling back down the rock face. "We're running out of time."

Something in his voice, the way that fear lined the syllables and braided them together, made Fwhip pause a moment before speedwalking towards the cliff. Ember took off and flew under the thin stone roof, already sensing the heat to come.

Between the three of them, they were able to get the bags into the hole just as the first glimpse of sun could be seen peeking above the horizon.

Gem poured a bit of the water that they had into a small dent in the ground after clearing it out a

little, and Ember hopped over and began drinking. Once the seeds had been scattered onto the ground as well, they pecked at them. The sun continued to rise. The temperature rose. Pix sat at the cave entrance facing the sunrise, the two siblings closer to the middle.

With the lack of clouds in the sky, Fwhip expected the sunrise to be a little bit underwhelming, but as he glanced over he saw the skyfields be stained a brilliant red by the sun, lighting the cliff face an almost glowing copper color.

"Whoa," he said, scooting over next to Pix.

Pix just nodded minutely, not taking his eyes off of the horizon or the rapidly burgeoning sun that scaled its surface and beyond.

"You should get some sleep, Pix," said Gem from behind them. "I'm going to bed too. It's been a long night, and we'll keep going tomorrow."

Pix just sighed silently, but did not move. His expression was cold and stony, and Fwhip scooted a little forwards to sit besides him. He tapped him on the shoulder.

"Gem's right, you know," he said. "You're our guide. We can't exactly have you running off of negative three hours of sleep here." He tried for a grin to go alongside the joke, but Pix didn't show any visible reaction.

"No, it's fine," he said in a low and tired voice. He rubbed his eyes. "You two get some rest. I'll keep watch."

"You stayed up the whole night," said Fwhip. "I was the one who was asleep the whole time. Also, you should probably eat something."

"Yeah," said Gem. "If you don't come back here and get this steak, I'm tossing it to the dragons." She said it with a clearly joking tone, but Pix looked back quite seriously. "They do need to eat," he said. "You can go ahead."

"That was a joke," said Gem, concerned. "They can hunt, Pix. Come on. Eat."

"We will drag you back there yourself if we have to," declared Fwhip.

Gem, nodding completely seriously, made to get up, and Pix glanced backwards with mild panic on his face and scuttled backwards a little. "Okay," he said, "I'll get a nap, but-"

"And some food," said Gem.

"And that," said Pix. "Fwhip, are you *sure* you're good up there?"

"Yeah," said Fwhip, shrugging his jacket off. "Just gotta try my best to not get burnt to a crisp. Take a nap, dude."

"Okay," said Pix with a sigh, going to the middle of that strange small cave and leaning back against the wall, hesitantly picking up the steak that Gem shoved at him. "I will."

Above, the sky was clear and the sun quickly rising, baking the sand below. It cast its great burning eye upon the three companions huddled in a little cave upon the rock. It did not blink nor lessen, but instead continued its impartial journey through the sky.

(And yes, Pix did eventually end up getting some sleep, with Ember resting in the shadow of his

bent arm.)

Chapter End Notes

Hey! So, if you've been reading the fic up to this point (which i sincerely hope you have because we're at chapter 18 now), you might notice that Pix is falling back into some of his old behaviors.

I'm pointing this out just to let you all know that this is, in fact, a direct correlation to him being back in the desert, and it will continue. In fact, it will get worse.

I don't say this to be mean or to make anyone anxious, I'm just warning ahead- if you're seriously bothered by actions of carelessness for one's safety, depictions of self-loathing, and some of the other things Pixl's dealing with in this fic, the next couple of chapters are going to feature that sort of thing pretty heavily.

Specific content warnings for chapters will be in their beginning notes as per usual.

Sorry this is so ominous, but as you all know, we take this sort of thing extremely seriously. On with the fic!

lessons (How to Shoulder the Weight of Living)

Chapter Summary

Between processing some old griefs, trying to figure out how to survive the desert, and keeping an eye on Pixl to make sure he doesn't get into too much trouble, Gem's a bit busy, but she makes it work.

Or,

We witness one full night in the desert, featuring some helpful advice and slightly concerning implications from Pixl.

Chapter Notes

this chapter was sponsored by the Celeste soundtrack which i used as background music while writing and which also goes hard as fuck. Sorry for the delay the pressure's been changing like wild around here and it's fucking with our brain

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sun set quietly, going gently into that quite neutral night, and Gem waited for the dragons to come soaring in as Fwhip shouted their names with increasing volume and desperation.

The day had hit with a relentless and blistering heat. Everything the light touched was like a hot iron to the touch, and Gem did not doubt that if you were to place a freshly cracked egg yolk on the sun-lit part of the stone floor of their little cave, it would fry within the minute.

Such was the heat that Fwhip, taking watch, had to take refuge in the center of the cave ten minutes after the sun rose out of concern of sunburn. Gem didn't mind, though- she'd slept through the day, and her dreams had been quite like one would experience during a fever.

Her mind was set on other things, though, which was a blessing in the midst of this herculean and brutal heat.

She had been doing some introspection in the hours and days after the truth had come tumbling out of her mouth, tangled like fine thread sat long in a basket. Slowly, and with hands that had become calloused over the months by need and desperation, she picked it apart and looked at it critically, as one would a particularly colorful specimen of corpses butterfly.

There's not exactly a way to explain the weight of repression, the panicked state it leaves you in constantly. Gem realized this while she was studying the threads of her psyche, trying to rationalize it all to herself. It leaves, and you are suddenly 20 pounds lighter. It leaves, and you can finally breathe easily after months or years of fighting underwater. Once all of that is out, the water is perfectly clear, no longer tainted.

Perfectly clear, yes, but now with a price: through the glass, one could now see the truth that lay

underneath, and the truth pierced. Instead of her chest constricting constantly, Gem found that sometimes the hint of a scent in the air or an action of her brother made her chest ache with a memory and a sudden gentle yet piercing pain.

Now that it was out in the open, her grief made itself known every time it found a familiar face to inhabit- tables, clouds, family.

Sometimes, Gem dreamt that she was alone.

"Odysseus," yelled Fwhip for the fifteenth time. "Hyacinth?" He sighed, turning back around and masking anxiousness in grumpiness. "Zero idea where they went," he said, walking back into the cave and gesturing impatiently behind him. "They might as well just be gone."

"Well, I sure *hope* not," said Gem, hands on her hips. "Or else we're all stuck here on foot."

"Good news, they're probably just hunting," said Pix from his spot on the ground, still lying down in the same position he had assumed when he laid down to sleep. He sounded tired and vaguely groggy. "Most of the bigger animals only come out at night."

"Good for them," said Gem.

It took Fwhip a couple seconds to process the joke, but when he did, he punched her as hard as he could on the arm, still grinning the whole time.

"Well, maybe," said Pix, still on the ground. "I mean, that's when they eat and stuff, but so do their predators." He paused. "Wait, you meant 'come out' in the- right. I *definitely* picked up on that the first time."

Fwhip chortled. "Okay, dude, come on, sit up," he said, walking over to Pix and extending a hand. "You gotta eat. Can't fly on an empty stomach."

"Actually, I'm fine," said Pix as he sat up and leaned back against the wall. Ember, woken up by the movement, chirped and flew up onto Fwhip's shoulder. "But thank you."

"It's been like, fourteen hours since the sun rose, dude," said Fwhip.

"I'm alright," said Pix with a peppiness that Gem was pretty sure he didn't quite feel.

"How about we do this," she said, standing up herself and stretching. "We have a long flight ahead of us, don't we?"

"We do," said Pix with a nod.

"How long until we get there, by the way?" asked Fwhip.

"About two weeks, at the rate we're going," said Pixl. "Maybe shorter."

"Right," said Gem, walking a little closer. She knelt to open the food bag. "So why don't you eat now so that you won't be hungry later?" Pix sighed and shut his eyes but did not protest, so she took it as a yes and sat down. "I just woke up. I'll eat with you."

"Should we get a fire started?" asked Fwhip, looking around and rubbing his hands. He was right, it *was* getting cold, but Gem shook her head as she bit into a rare slice of bread.

"We're going to be here for the next 15 minutes, tops," she said, glancing over to make sure Pix was eating. He caught her looking, gave a strained smile, and reached over to the bag to get a knife

and fork. Gem looked back at her brother. "Besides, we already have an Ember with us."

"That's true," said Fwhip, looking over and grinning at the cardinal on his shoulder. "Little guy." He looked over at Gem, disbelief shining through a crease on his face. "By the way, when did you come around to them? I thought you didn't like that we picked them up 'cos they were eating the seeds you packed."

"Well, I did at first," said Gem, taking another bite of bread. "And then I sort of... honestly, I have no idea." She shrugged. "I can't explain it. But I'm okay with the bird now."

"Good," said Fwhip, hands on his hips. "Because we're not getting rid of them, by the way."

Pix whistled, and Ember came flapping over to land on his head. He looked up. "That works too," he said. Ember chirped.

The temperature was dropping rapidly, and Gem shivered a little as she went to put the remaining bread back in the bag. The sky was cloudless, revealing a thin crescent moon and an arcane blanket of scattered stars wrought into the empty spaces of the night sky. Fwhip looked absently out for a minute or two, just looking.

"You know, Pix, I gotta say," he said, "I get it now."

"Get what?" asked Pixl.

"Why you'd choose to live out here," said Fwhip, half to himself, still looking up. "It's beautiful."

"Yeah," said Pix, something strange in his voice. "I guess it is."

"Mhm," said Gem, packing the bags to avoid having to respond.

It was quiet like this for a little while longer, all three sharing a common space and common tongue. The heat radiated slowly off of the stones, and Gem let her hand absently wander around, searching for leftover warmth to pick up.

The wind made a rasping sound as it brushed against the stone walls of their cave, the only noises that complimented it the breathing of the three wanderers.

(They thought the world was devoid of life, but they failed to consider themselves.)

(You. You are alive.)

From the east came rhythmic flapping, which occasionally split into two sister rhythms before morphing back into one.

"*There* we go," said Fwhip affectionately as the two dragons eased into sight. "We were starting to get worried, you two!"

Odysseus landed on a rock right in front of one of the cave entrances, wobbling a little for balance, and poked his head in curiously. Ember went dead silent, and his pupils narrowed as he looked at them. Steam rose from his nostrils.

"None of that," chided Gem, walking up and pushing him out of the cave to see if there was any way he could be mounted from this angle. She scrabbled over rocks and hoisted herself up onto his back, looking around for Hyacinth, who was scuttling about on the plains below.

Fwhip handed her a couple of the bags and she hung them on the hooks that were attached to the

saddle and on specific points on the harnesses, specifically designed to let the dragons carry as much weight as possible while not stressing any of their joints. Fwhip himself grabbed a few and scrambled down the side of the mountain with them towards Hyacinth, skidding as he went.

"Careful," called Gem.

"I'm always careful," he shouted over his shoulder, promptly tripping and landing on one of the (thankfully softer) bags with a heavy *oof*.

Eventually, all three of them were in the air, with everything packed and loaded. Ember was taking a ride in a backup scarf Gem had packed and currently had tied around her mouth, nestled into a fold around her chest, since she'd argued that being stuck in a small bag for hours probably wasn't good for them.

In front of her, Odysseus glided steadily on, guided by Pixl with Fwhip sitting in the back as he always did.

Now, don't get her wrong, Gem knew the two had been close even before the Rapture. Fwhip had talked with Pixl much more than Gem had back then, and when he came back he always had a grin on his face and news to report. He'd bounce in with a new set of information or a neat little trinket or a gift for her and talk about what he'd gotten done or the things he'd learned.

It didn't take a genius to see that Fwhip had considered Pix a close ally and possibly even a closer friend. In Gem's mind, Fwhip had always reminded her of a kid, even as he grew older and more burdens lined his face. The way he approached everything with a sort of ferocious hope, his energetic way of moving about the world. How he trusted so easily.

"Fwhip talks about you all the time, you know," Gem commented as she knelt, rifling through a shulker box for amethyst to trade Pixl for honeycombs.

"Does he?" asked Pixl, leaning against the wall, a box of his own sat by his feet. (Even back then, he'd never been truly at ease, always on the lookout for something. How had Gem never noticed that? Looking back now, it was so obvious.) "Hopefully he isn't sharing any embarrassing secrets." He smiled easily, warmth tinting the upturned corners of his lips.

"Oh, nothing of that sort," said Gem with a laugh, standing up with the box. "Just things he's learned from you, even little gifts he has for me."

Pix nodded. "He's very bright," he said. "Knows a lot more than he lets on about. He'd make for a great student if I weren't so-" he waved both hands around vaguely with a sigh, "busy."

Gem nodded. "Oh, by the way," she said, "I'm free for the next thirty minutes or so- if you wanna stick around and get a drink or something like that, feel free to."

"I appreciate the offer," said Pixl with a slight bow and an apologetic smile, "but Joel's died 35 times in the last hour and I really don't want to keep the Vigil waiting any longer than I have to." His communicator pinged, and he glanced at it with a minute raise of his eyebrows. "Make that 36." He picked up the boxes nearest Gem.

"Completely fair," said Gem with a nod. "Time makes an enemy of us all, doesn't it?"

Pixl turned around and raised an eyebrow minutely. "Oh, I wouldn't think so," he said. "It's just a rather slippery thing that we all have to bind in schedules. I think it's more of a symbiotic relationship than a fight." And with that, he was gone.

A universe later, Gem was riding on the back of a dragon, weary and wayworn, watching her brother as he held on tight to Pixl, sitting behind him, head turned as it rested on his shoulder.

Her mind flicked to another scene much like this one. It was years ago. She was visiting Sausage. Fwhip had tagged along, if only to escape his infinite duties as Count. It was late, and after dinner they'd all taken to the couches. Fwhip had eventually fallen asleep leaning on Sausage (who had tried his best to talk as quietly as he could as soon as he'd noticed), his head resting on his older brother's shoulder in much the same way it was resting now on Pixl's.

Gem's chest suddenly tightened.

She had to blink back tears and shut her eyes hard for a few seconds, but although she initially flinched away from the sudden yearning pain that those two scenes together brought, she just as quickly forced herself to embrace it and made herself look again.

There was an ocean of change between now and then, but she desperately wanted to reach over the gap and tuck a stray strand of hair behind Fwhip's ear.

What is.

What was.

What could have been.

Gem took a deep breath and looked in front of her, her mind automatically going over that same old script- anything more pressing to focus on? Anything else you can figure out or plan or focus?

She was halfway through the motions of shying away again before she realized that no, there was nothing else really to occupy her mind right now. Pix was leading, and all of the things were in their respective bags, and Ember the bird was nestled comfortably into her scarf.

What else is there to do than face what I've been avoiding for months? she asked herself.

Nobody answered, so Gem let herself look and remember and wonder and grieve.

She drank all the details in, lingered on how Fwhip's goggles were slightly askew, how Pixl's hair blew back in masses, how he was careful not to move lest he deserve the man sitting behind him. She let herself bask in the paradox that is bittersweet reckoning. Bittersweet doesn't do it justice. This is bittersweet if it was a thousand times more potent and made its home in your chest, bright blue and pulsing.

This is healing if it had teeth.

Gem had to wonder why it hurt so much. Not really hurt. She knew somehow that this was a necessary process. But it still straddled that line between healing and hurt, or maybe it was both at once, or maybe it was neither. Maybe it was pure intensity. Maybe it was truth.

Whatever it was, the most intense of it passed eventually, still lingering in the back of her mind and giving her a solemn sort of peace. She felt twenty years older. She took a deep breath, let her shoulders untense like they hadn't in months.

Not closure, but progress.

Gem could work with that.

Throughout the night, Gem thought consistently and watched a bit more. She came to a conclusion.

That conclusion proceeded as follows: there were infinite ways that the past was different from now. She had tried to count them all, but lost track halfway through.

She had always known this, of course. The clouds had always spun shadowed sunlight into splintered beams laid gently to rest on her hair. Those clouds were gone now, and the sun was an adversary, but that same light had and would feed the same trees somewhere in the world, and that had to count for something.

Despite the differences and everything that came trodding alongside them, though, it was connected somehow. She couldn't place her finger on *what* just yet, but something was there.

Below, hobscobbled dunes and absconces of half-baked mountain foothills stumbled by, trying in their eternal weariness to reach the sky but ultimately failing somehow. (What counted as sky? Could one perceive it as the end of human vision from a point on the ground? How low did you have to go until the definition applied?) There resided flocks of long-legged goats with strange horns that scampered and bleated as the dragons and their luggage passed above.

The sky remained horribly clear, and Gem was lost in thought as she looked up at the sky until suddenly she felt Hyacinth tugging at the reins and looked down to see Odysseus wheeling below, ready to land. She banked Hyacinth quickly and followed, landing on a flat sandy surface that was cracked and brittle.

"Lesson one about surviving the desert," said Pix, who had already dismounted Odysseus and was pointing to a nearby cactus. "These things have water in them. You have to boil the water before you drink it else you get sick."

"Right," said Fwhip with a yawn. He rubbed his eyes. "Anything else?"

"Lesson two, a very small amount of these shrubs are edible," said Pix, pointing to a small succulent by his feet. "This one contains enough poison to kill a Ravager in 14 hours."

"How do you know that?" asked Fwhip.

"We fed one to one in a last ditch effort to escape during a Pillager raid I stumbled into one time," said Pix. "Lesson three: scorpions."

"Scorpions?" asked Gem, looking down at her feet automatically.

"Scorpions," agreed Pix. "The vast majority of them are lethal. Most of the rest will make you extremely sick. There is one species whose stings only itch horribly for a week and then leave a permanent scar and also temporarily blinds you. There is another species which is actually quite friendly and doesn't sting humans. That species does not live in this area of the desert."

"Basically, everything wants to kill us?" asked Fwhip.

"Not everything," clarified Pix. "But most things do, yes."

"Awesome," said Fwhip. "Any more lessons?"

"Yes," said Pix. "Underground is the safest place to be. That is why I have found us a cave."

He gestured down to a crevice in the ground, which was utterly dark inside. From the east came the

first signal flare of light warning them that the sun was rising.

"Are you sure it's safe in there?" asked Gem, peering in.

"Safer than it will be out here," said Pixl solemnly. He gestured down again. "You two get inside. I'll drop the bags in."

"No way," said Fwhip. "You won't be able to get all of those in by yourself before the sun rises."

"That is true," said Pix with a small, grim smile.

(What happened to him? Gem wondered. How did we get here?)

"No, we'll help," said Gem firmly, walking over to Odysseus and grabbing as many bags as she could carry. "It'll go quicker that way."

"Yeah," said Fwhip, picking up a couple as well.

"You've been flying for a while, though," said Pix. "You need a break."

Gem looked him firmly in the eye. "So do you," she said.

He did not respond. Gem went back to unpacking.

When all was stored in the little crevice, Gem made sure that Pix and Fwhip were the first ones in. She made sure that they could get in and out safely. The dragons gone to seek shelter and shadow, she climbed down, away from the burning light.

The last thing the scorching sun saw was a tired face with grease and dirt in her hair wearing faded archetypes of what had once been proud and strong colors staring into the space it inhabited before retreating down into the dark, into safety. All was silent in the desert. Nearby, vultures circled overhead.

Chapter End Notes

occasionally i write a chapter and read back through it and worry that i was too overt with some of the implications and word choices, that some of the transitions are clumsy as fuck, that the whole thing reads like a burlap sack of bricks. i figured out long ago that to create means to create an imperfection, for perfection is a mirage people wander desperately towards rather than a solid goal on the top of a mountain, but it still pains me to share these things when i know i'll never be able to fully do this story justice

i do try my best though. and i know these are just biases. i know this story best, having written it, i know all of the ins and outs and little flaws while an outsider does not. that is why every little bit of positive feedback i get on this is worth so much. so yeah. thank y'all for everything :] onwards we go!

The Cave

Chapter Summary

Fwhip, looking for something to do before his brain explodes, goes a little deeper into the cave to see what he can find. He gets a little bit more than he bargained for.

Or,

An expired prophecy scribbled on the walls and a perilously close call.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains graphic depictions of violence in the form of descriptions of blood and gore, injury, blunt force head trauma, and death. (The death and blunt force trauma does not apply to any of the characters, nor any of the creatures affiliated with them.)

chapter titled after the song of the same name by Mumford and Sons

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pixl and Gem were asleep.

It was nice and cool inside of the cave, the air shimmering at a very pleasant temperature actually, and sleepy sunbeams of misleading intensity ambled gently through the entrance at the top through which the three, their bird, and their things had entered the crevice.

All things considered, it was a fantastic place to take a nap, considering that Pix wasn't even stirring from the nightmares that plagued him sometimes (Fwhip would know he wasn't moving. He was currently leaned on his shoulder with his legs splayed out and his face tilted towards the ceiling.)

A great place to take a nap, that is, unless you were Fwhip.

See, normally Fwhip would have loved to take a nap. He would have happily curled up and snoozed for a while. If the crew had been traveling by day like they normally did, well, he figured he'd be passed out right now!

But he wasn't, because he'd slept on the back of Odysseus. Which was okay actually, because it meant that someone could go on watch without having to lose sleep over it. He was wide awake and it was perfectly fine!

Well, mostly perfectly fine. There was just a tiny little problem.

Fwhip was awake, yes, but he was also bored.

When Fwhip was bored, usually he fiddled with metal scraps or wandered around or counted rocks

or something. Anything to keep his brain occupied, of course. He brought a book on general mechanics for reading material- never know when it might be useful, after all! -but even that was old material right now. His fingers itched. He wanted to move. He wanted to wander around.

Unfortunately, he could not, due to the reason that the three were in the cave at all, a.k.a the sun. If he left, he'd get overheated and probably die or something, which would not be good. He sighed annoyedly and looked around for something, anything to do.

After about fifteen seconds of investigation, Fwhip came to a sound conclusion: either he could wake his sibs- Gem and Pixl up to talk with them or at them until the sun set, which he didn't want to do because they both really needed the rest, or he could go farther down into the cave and poke around and see what was down there.

Or, he could stay here, leaned against Pixl's shoulder, and enjoy the simple peace and contentment that came with being trusted enough to be around someone as they slept.

Fwhip sat up as slowly as he could as to not disturb Pix and looked around his surroundings. Sandstones bleached pure white by the stone, bags all in a heap, Ember sleeping next to a small bowl filled with a small amount of their precious water supply. On the side where the ground sloped into the cave, Gem leaned, hands clasped over stomach in sleep. Next to her sat Pix. Closer towards where the cave opened, a small firepit sat, empty of logs.

They'd cautiously explored a little ways into the cave by the light of Gem's staff when they'd come in to make sure nothing was down there, but there was no sign of anything. Fwhip had commented that it was incredibly weird that there were no monsters down here, even though they'd barely seen any on their journey. Pix was silent. Gem had told him to keep an ear out for anything that might spawn, since he was the only one on watch, but so far...

Fwhip looked from where his friends sat over into the cave and then back again, weighing his options.

He'd definitely wake the other two up if he talked for too long, no matter how good the company. And besides, they kept backup torches carefully bundled in one of the packs. They had like, three. This counted as a backup since Gem was asleep, right?

Yeah! It was probably fine. He'd go a short ways down the cave and maybe lick a stalactite for fun if he found one and then come back up and then continue doing nothing. Maybe he'd even be tired enough to take a nap after exploring.

Fwhip took a torch, struck a match, and marched (far too) merrily into the unknown.

He may or may not have looked back a couple times as he descended, yes. He may or may not have seriously considered going back. But he was Fwhip! He had a sword! He'd be fine. Besides, the rocks in here were cool, even if he didn't see any stalactites yet.

He took a closer look at the walls as he went. On one side, sandstone veins crept into rough-hewn granite. On the other, small deposits of glittering things- coal? precious stones? -twinkled merrily overhead. He looked up at them for a minute, and pondered the implications of how much they looked like stars.

His footsteps echoed eerily as they landed, and Fwhip found himself moving slower and with more caution- he had learned as a child that many things live in caves, both ancient and cruel, and they don't care how gruesomely you die. It's hard to unlearn old habits, and practically impossible to unwind a lesson that had been seared into your brain since you were ten.

The cave branched off at several points and twisted and turned as it went down, but he made sure to mark his path. Thankfully, it was easy enough to mark his way, if the footing wasn't a little bit awkward. He nearly tripped on stones several times on his way down, every little skitter of gravel causing a ripple of echoes across the walls of the deeps, alerting who knows what in the depths.

Fwhip mentally checked his anxiety and stubbornly forged on. Normally, he'd have stumbled upon at least seven monsters by now. Then again, normally he wouldn't even be down here.

Shut up, he told his brain. *We are exploring a cave and there is literally nothing in here. It's fine.*

His brain did not respond, and his anxiety did not lessen, but Fwhip figured he was in the right this time. Seriously, was there anything in here besides himself?

The passage opened up a little and Fwhip raised his torch, looking around to see all he could. In the dark of the cave that had never seen light before, he could faintly make out more rocks, more stone, and a faint smattering of bones (bats? rats?) strewn vaguely across the floor. The room continued in the opposite direction from where he had come from, the edges of his torches fading into a bright black.

Fwhip stopped a minute and listened for footsteps, especially from the area he'd come from, but he could hear nothing.

"Weird," he said out loud. Nothing answered the echoes of his voice, except for a faint shuffling rasp that couldn't be heard over the crackling of the torch.

With an internal shrug, Fwhip took one last sweeping look around the chamber and turned to leave. This was as good as any a time to turn around, since there were obviously no monsters around. Stepping closer to one of the walls, he scanned the passage back up for an easy path to scramble up.

To the wall to his left: straight lines that caught his eye.

Fwhip turned from the passage, leaning in closer to examine it with newfound interest. The rasping got louder, but he almost couldn't hear it over the crackle of the torch and the intensity of his focus.

The lines were graceful if not much faded, painted in a dark ink in arcane shapes he could not understand. He walked back a step or two, accidentally stepping down on a bone in his haste. He looked down at his feet to shift his stance off of the remains, looked back up to examine the painting from a broader angle, and found himself face-to-face with a husk.

Fwhip stood there just staring at it for a moment, brain not registering what it was. Its eye sockets were deep and hollow, and if there were eyes in there then the torch's light could not reach it. It stunk of sweat and the miasma of rot and deprecated muscle, and what was left of its hair was stringy and thin.

The husk groaned in a manner that could almost have been mistaken for a roar if it didn't sound so weary and tired, and that caught Fwhip off guard. He was shaken to his senses, considering just letting it go because it didn't seem to be too much danger, and then he caught the glint of metal to his left.

"Okay," he said, sidestepping quickly and taking out his sword in a hand shaking from the sudden burst of adrenaline he'd received. The husk approached, holding a relatively blunt but still dangerous sword in its left hand, and Fwhip automatically held out the torch to counter the block

while he fumbled for his sword.

The husk's sword hit with much more force than he was anticipating, the torch toppled out of his hand and sputtered out as it hit the floor, and suddenly everything was pitch, pitch black.

From there on in, all was hell.

Fwhip found himself in a close quarters fight high on adrenaline against an enemy who was almost silent and whom he could not hear. He almost tripped over rocks several times, and if the husk had known any better sword tactics, he would certainly have died where he stood. He could hear almost nothing except the clashing of metal and the heavy, jagged breathing coming from his own chest. Completely turned around, he desperately shouted into the dark as he continued trading blows with the husk.

"Gem?" he yelled, ducking and elbowing the husk as hard as he could in the stomach, the shot going slightly wide but landing surprisingly well for someone who currently couldn't see anything. "Pixl?" He stood up and felt the air of a close miss rush over his head. "Whoa. I need a little bit of help down here, you guys!"

He continued desperately hacking about, vying for any sort of purchase of (his) sword against (its) flesh. He ran up against the wall twice and hit it three times, involuntarily wincing at the clamor it caused.

It was the longest feeling fight he'd ever been in. He had no idea how long it had been going for, but he knew that he was caught in some horrific purgatory amidst the flow of time: all nerves buzzing, there was only back then in the light with his family and hope and here, where he would most likely die alone in the dark and Gem and Pix would have to go on alone.

His chest tightened at that, and his sword slashes became more desperate. If he was going to go down- if he *had* to go down- he was not going to go down gently. Not without a fight.

He deserved better than that.

Gem and Pixl deserved better than that.

"Gem?" he yelled again, voice cracking and breaking. The husk shoved him and he stumbled backwards, almost losing his balance. "Pixl?"

Far as he could tell, he had gotten three good hits in so far. He parried a blow, felt the cold clutch of a hand trying to grasp his arm, and desperately made an educated guess, lunging straight for where the husk's chest should have been.

He felt his sword sink in. He felt the husk pause for a minute, stunned, before starting to thrash wildly. He ducked to avoid the sword hitting him and pulled his own out, breathing heavily.

"Okay," he said, backing up cautiously and circling, ready for another round. "One-oh."

In the passage above, there came a bright blue light. It almost blinded him and he looked up towards it, shielding his eyes from one hand. He got a brief glance of the cave being illuminated in diamond-like iridescence and a figure hurtling towards him before his inner forearm erupted in pain and he fell flat on his ass on the floor against the wall, temporarily stunned.

Gem barely had time to blink as Pix landed heavily on the ground of the cave and started running straight for the husk that had Fwhip up against the wall. It swung as he stared at her, and he

collapsed.

She scrambled down quickly herself, but Pixl had already reached the monster and was swiftly parrying all of its feeble blows, quarterstaff spinning at a terrible speed. For once, Gem was glad she could not see his face.

She ran over to try and help, but the husk caught notice, turning over to her and socking her square in the jaw. She stumbled backwards, checking quickly for any blood, but when she found none and her eyes opened back up (when had she closed them?) she saw Pix jab the husk to the floor in one swift movement, breathing heavily.

"You might want to shut your eyes for a second," he said to the both of them without looking at them directly. He raised his quarterstaff in both hands and brought it down with a soft *whoosh* of dead air. Gem shut her eyes the instant before the blow hit, but the wet snap she heard and the following noises of something getting the shit whacked out of it afforded her mind several choice visions of what exactly happened.

When all movement had been extinguished from the husk and Pix had stopped hitting it, she opened her eyes again.

Gem was primarily a healer, and she was no stranger to severe injuries, but she automatically averted her eyes from the mess of blood that lay on the floor in roughly the same place the husk's head had been. She was *not* going to look at that for any longer than she had to.

She forced the brief glance out of her brain, running over to where Pix was already kneeling beside Fwhip, who was clutching his arm.

"I went down here because I got bored," he said, voice low and drawn and millimeters from tears. He kept his sweaty face away from his arm, which was bleeding freely through his cloak from a gash on his inner forearm. He took a deep breath and continued, voice hitching. "I was gonna come right back up. I didn't- there wasn't anything down here until there was and then-"

"Hey," said Pix with a gentleness Gem had rarely heard from him, especially during the past few months. In the dim light coming from her staff, she could see him holding one of Fwhip's hands between his. "It's okay. I'm pretty sure there was just the one. We took care of it."

He said "we" like Gem had done anything except for getting her jaw hit like an idiot. She dismissed the notion and looked over, taking a look at Fwhip's arm as closely as she could without actually touching it.

"Did it touch you?" she asked Pixl, who shook his head. "Okay. Good. Could you please get me a health potion from the small grey bag? They're all labeled. It should be in a little flask."

Pix nodded and stood up, awkwardly grabbing his staff after a short pause. After he grabbed the torch and gestured to Gem to light it, he went back up the passage, and soon the glow of the firelight was lost to the twists and turns of the upper cave.

Gem wasn't focused on that, though. The only thing that she cared about right now was that her little brother was hurt.

"Did you get hit anywhere else?" she asked Fwhip, trying to calm the panic that had bloomed in her chest. "Stomach, neck..."

"Don't think so," said Fwhip, cautiously sitting up and wincing as his injured arm moved. He still wasn't looking at it. "Hey Gem? Do me a favor and don't tell me how bad it is. I really don't need to

know that right now."

He tried to say it as casually as he could, but his teeth were still gritted and there were small tears running from his eyes. Gem nodded, even though he couldn't see.

"We need to get this jacket off of you," she said, propping up her staff beside her and tugging off Fwhip's jacket on the other arm as gently as she could.

"Okay," said Fwhip with a deeply resigned sigh, carefully extending his other arm out to full length. "This is gonna suck shit."

"Yeah," said Gem, removing the rest of his jacket from his torso, showing his t-shirt with a front pocket underneath it.

"I found this mural thing on the wall," said Fwhip, eyes still shut, tense and talking to himself to distract from the operation. "Really old cave art. I think it was on the opposite wall. Just do it quick, please."

Gem nodded as she took the opposite edge of Fwhip's sleeve and pulled it towards her as fast as she could without causing more damage, holding the fabric out so that it didn't stick to his arm.

"I didn't get a chance to-" Fwhip paused, inhaling in pain, and Gem paused a millisecond before continuing to peel the jacket off, hating that she had to do this to him.

"I'm sorry," she said as the last of the fabric grazed over the wound and over his hand with one final tug.

"Don't be," said Fwhip with an effort and a forced exhale. "You had to do it. It's nothing personal. Again, don't tell me how bad it is, but is it deep?"

Gem lifted her staff up to squint at the gash. "A little bit. It doesn't look like it's messed with anything important, though, and Pix should be back any minute now with a healing potion."

"Is there a lot of blood?"

Yeah. There was. It was freely dripping onto the ground, in fact. "Yes, there is. Hold your arm up as high as you can. It'll lessen the bloodflow up there."

Fwhip did so and continued with what he had been saying earlier, less laboriously this time. "Yeah. Okay. Thanks. The thing on the wall- I didn't get to see what it was before the husk popped up in front of me and," he gestured with his other arm, "this happened."

"How are you so calm about this?" asked Gem, looking at the passageway to watch for the telltale glimmer of torchlight.

Fwhip shrugged with one shoulder, arm still up in the air. "I know it won't last long. I'll be fine." He looked over at her, eyes glinting in the light of her staff. "Your jaw."

"Yep," said Gem, poking it gingerly. "Going to be sore for a week or so. Nothing time can't heal."

"If you want a sip of the healing potion-" said Fwhip.

"No," said Gem stubbornly. "You need it more than I do. Besides, it's precious, and I don't want to waste it on something as small as this." She paused a minute, seeing that Fwhip had raised his eyebrow. "Thanks for the concern though," she said, gentler. "Seriously."

"Okay, just making sure," said Fwhip. "You've been taking care of me for years. I figured I might as well start returning the favor at some point."

Gem smiled at him, then risked a glance over at the outer wall. The husk's corpse was completely gone, as monsters tended to dissipate quite quickly once dead, and if she squinted she could see extremely faint lines on the walls. A light appeared in the passageway and Pix came through, quarterstaff replaced with a flask.

"Thank you," said Gem and Fwhip at the same time, and they looked at each other and grinned a little before Fwhip took the flask and, uncorking it clumsily with his thumb, chugged it all in one go.

"I also got some towels, since, you know," said Pix, gesturing to the blood still running down Fwhip's arm. A little bit had gotten onto his shirt and his pants, but not too much, and besides, Gem was pretty sure he didn't care. He took the rag from Pix and wiped the blood off of his arm, scooting away from the puddle and shakily standing. Gem stood up, and he put his arm around her shoulder for a minute before stepping forwards quite confidently with a nod.

"Better?" asked Pix.

"Still hurts," said Fwhip offhandedly. "But yeah. Better." He walked forwards towards the wall, Gem and Pixl in tow.

He had been right, Gem saw. Lines swooped up and down the chamber wall, some possibly letters, some showing shapes she couldn't exactly make sense of.

"Huh," she said. "That doesn't look like a language I've ever seen before."

"That," said Pix, running his hand across the wall cautiously, "is because it's proto-Pixandrian. 5, maybe 6,000 years old?"

"Whoa," said Fwhip, half-crossing and then hurriedly uncrossing his arms. "What does it say?"

"Uh," said Pix, walking to the corner of the cave where the written wall met the side that the passageway opened on. "Let's see here. Script goes right to left..."

He walked along the wall, muttering to himself under his breath in a flowing tongue with occasional pauses as he pondered what Gem could only assume was an unfamiliar word or phrase, before stepping backwards with a small nod. "A prophecy," he said, slightly dismissing.

"From six thousand years ago?" asked Gem, walking closer. "I didn't know that people had that ability back then." Fwhip whistled softly behind her.

"Oh, yeah, a small sect of the desert peoples have been prophesiers since before records truly began," said Pix, stepping back and looking up. "Over time, people gathered around the ones who were endowed with visions so that they could lead. Historically, the vision-havers predicted catastrophic events and kept everyone safe." He paused briefly. "Most of them did, anyways."

"What does it say?" asked Fwhip with interest.

"It's a very old prophecy," said Pix. "World will end in fire, big explosion, an ancient evil dies and takes the world with it, etcetera etcetera."

"Wait, an explosion?" asked Fwhip, sounding strangely worried.

"Yep," said Pix. He looked over at him. "Why?"

"I'll explain later," said Fwhip, a little bit too hurriedly to be believable, and started up the passageway. "Come on. I don't want to be in this stupid cave any longer than I have to be."

Gem glanced at Pixl, who just shrugged, and the three made their way back up to sunlight and life and the little crevice in the ground where they held court in the valleys of the sun.

As soon as they reached the top, all three sat down to go to sleep, since there were still many hours left in the day. Fwhip yawned and leaned his good side against Gem.

"Tired now?" she asked with a grin.

"Yep," said Fwhip. "I am never going back down there again."

"Good," said Pixl gruffly from the corner. All three laughed a little at that, and then they were asleep, ready to rise as the moon came sailing over once again.

Chapter End Notes

i thought this chapter was going to be a short one and then i check the character count and we're at about the 5k word mark. Whoops. I've written 90% of this in the past three hours. what autism does to a motherfucker eh?

since this chapter required the graphic depictions of violence warning to be added to the fic, i made a post that you can find [here](#) explaining why the fic still has the Creator Chose Not to Use Archive Warnings rating attached to it, since i figured some people would have questions about that. hope this clears some things up! :]

vulture boy (interim, the third)

Chapter Summary

We check in on Pixl, who is starting to feel the strain of bearing an incredibly heavy burden for this long, and take a few moments to discuss the theological implications of vultures.

Or,

The final few little pebbles that begin the avalanche fall neatly into place.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains detailed descriptions of a nightmare and various effects of PTSD. There is also much talk of death, though there are no descriptions of blood or gore.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In the dream, he was 29.

Pixl stood on an eerily square obsidian platform, looking up at the island above him. His throat constricted-

(I'll skip this part. You know where this is. You know how this scenario plays out by now.)

"You okay?" asked Jimmy next to him.

Pix shut his eyes as tightly as he could, took in a shaky breath. The air tasted like gunpowder. If he curbed his fear, if he just waited a few more seconds-

"Ow, stop shoving," said Joel from behind. Pixl was jostled forwards, he stumbled, and his eyes flew open on instinct. He caught a glimpse of Jimmy's shoes and froze.

"Pix," Jimmy repeated, genuine concern tinting his voice now. He tapped Pixl's shoulder.

"Seriously, are you alright? You don't look good. Let me get a look at you."

Pix looked up.

Some nights, Jimmy looked the same as he had in the flesh: blonde hair, head bare, wide eyes.

Tonight, he looked worse.

Pix was fucking tired.

He took another breath, glancing around the people at him. They all jittered and flickered uneasily, wraiths in a twisted memory.

"Is it the nausea?" asked Jimmy's corpse, horrifyingly unaware of its state, tilting its head in confusion.

"Don't worry about it," muttered Pix, staring over his shoulder into the void, as if he was going to step backwards into it. As if. He wasn't foolish enough to make *that* mistake again.

Some nights, he walked willingly into the nightmare, just wanting to get it over with. Some nights he took a wander around, trying to figure out a crack to claw through or a new detail he might have missed. He flipped the timeline, threw buckets at the endermen when nobody was looking. Something. Anything to get him out.

Tonight, he was worn dangerously thin, weary and playing his role without complaint, but with an important footnote: something was going to snap soon. He could feel it. He could not continue like this.

There is a specific toll that bearing this sort of weight gives. It grates, never eases up. And to those who have not borne it, I cannot impress enough how tiring it gets seeing the same face in the mirror of your soul every day, how the pressure does not lessen while your body grows weaker under the strain.

Consider Atlas, kneeling eternally under the infinite weight of the sky. He cannot call for help or do anything, for this is his burden and his curse, and if he drops it, he will never escape no matter how fast he runs, for the sky will fall and flatten everything within a hundred miles, or so the myths say. He is a living Shepard's tone, muscles straining eternally, caught in stasis between what must be done and what cannot be held by one person.

Consider Pix now, acolyte of his own grief and guilt, walking a nightmare every night with calloused feet.

(Do you see it now? There, behind black frosted glass, a hulking herculean beast. I've pointed it out for you, but don't worry, you're quite safe. Its thousand blunted eyes are set on one man only.)

He listened half-awake to Fwhip's speech, waited for the first body to raise into the sky and the fight to begin. A horn sounded, the great rush began, and as the dragon swooped over him, a thousand times larger than usual, teeth as large as one of the houses back home (oh, don't say home, you know you haven't had one in years) coming right for him and like the coward he was, he turned and he fled. Waiting for his blood to be spilled on the obsidian before as sacrifice. He could feel its hot breath on his neck-

"Pix, wake up," said Gem softly, shaking him gently by the shoulders. "The sun's set and we're all packed up. It's time to go."

Pix tried his best to tamp down the rush of adrenaline that was left over from the nightmare and immediately pushed himself to his knees as fast as his joints would allow with a wince. He'd been holding his muscles tense lately and damned if he didn't know why, but it'd been wreaking havoc on his shoulders. Everything hurt when he woke up in the morning. He couldn't bring himself to care anymore.

"Me and Fwhip were talking," said Gem, reaching out a hand to help him up. Pix looked at it but shook his head, opting to stand up himself despite the loud protest his knees made in response. "We thought that maybe I could lead for a while, since you're..." She sighed. "You're not looking good."

Pixl looked up and met her dead in the eyes for a second, although the action only reminded him of the nightmare and the dread that followed him around. He wondered if she could see the tiredness behind his eyes, the way his soul bent in strange new ways to stop itself from breaking. All he saw in hers were concern, and a smidge of tiredness underlined by the shadows under her eyes and the week-old bruise blooming on her jaw, already starting to fade.

"Thanks, but I'm fine," he said, breaking eye contact and walking over to Odysseus and hopping up onto him with perhaps a bit more scrambling for purchase than usual.

"Are you gonna eat?" asked Fwhip, walking over and stretching as he leaned against Odysseus. "It's been a minute."

"I'm not hungry, but thank you," said Pix. Which wasn't exactly a lie. Eating had been a little bit difficult lately due to the dread that trailed behind him invisibly, imperceptibly, twisting his stomach and axing his appetite with one casual flick of the finger. Was he actually hungry? Probably. Did he particularly care? No. Actually, by now, he probably would have been dead if it weren't for Gem and Fwhip badgering him constantly about his vital signs.

They were onto him, Pix knew that for sure. Every moment since the three had reentered the desert, they'd kept a close eye on him. Jumping to do tasks so that he could rest. Asking him to eat when it was time to, even sitting by him to keep him company. Pix knew that they saw what was going on with him even if they didn't understand why and tried to help. *Help him.*

Him with his dead eyes and matted hair and aura of death. Him with his doom and his mood and his burdens. This entire time, Pix had been trying to stay in the background and make himself as small a presence as possible, and that was intentional. He did not want help. Help required effort from people who had far more reasons to be noticed than he did. And yet, these two went out of their way as far as possible to gently drag him back up to the surface right when he was finally starting to sink back under. Wasting energy. Wasting time.

Try as he might, he could not understand it at *all*.

Pix would have asked why they were doing what they did, or why they cared so much, but that would have broken this strange unspoken routine they had going on. And so he played along, doing all they asked because if he didn't they'd be more worried and he didn't want to do that to them. Trying desperately to find every loophole he could wiggle his way out of.

The way he saw it, he was a man caught in between the dead ends of a paradox, constantly breaking but unable to snap by the very definition.

"We saw some vultures earlier," said Fwhip, hopping up behind him and waiting for Pix to lean back before holding onto him like he always did in order to not fall off during the flight. (Pix was sure he did it for his own safety as much as he did it for Pixl's and it made his heart hurt a little.) "I don't think they were circling over us, but Gem made sure Ember wasn't out and about just to make sure."

Vultures. Pixl knew vultures. In his wanderings, they'd always circled over him, curious about this walking ghost that never seemed to die. Vultures were sacred things, holy things, tenders of the dead, never a bad omen but an omen nonetheless. They prayed deep within the chest cavities of the fallen, heads bowed and beaks smattered with their prayers. Yes, Pixl knew vultures.

"Really," he said, checking the reins to make sure they were adjusted properly.

"Yep," said Fwhip. "Four or five, maybe? They left us alone eventually after the dragons started

getting snappy."

Pix nodded and flicked the reins, trying to ignore the warmth of the man behind him, trying to pretend that there wasn't another dragon with another pilot flying close behind. Tried to ignore the dread slowly but surely staining his bones black.

These days, he'd settled into a sort of mute apathy, a tired resigned cycle that he knew would one day slip the bearing and fly full speed towards the nearest target. He did not want to be anywhere near these two when that happened.

If anyone here deserved to get hurt by the mistakes he'd made, it was him.

So he sat there in ominous silence, holding an unspoken burden that turned him from what had once been almost human into one of those cruel kings from the myths: filled to the brim with a doom beyond words, intimidating and unapproachable, the most invisible and most human of weights wrapped around his ankles.

(Almost unapproachable, anyways.)

(However much Pix fashioned himself as a creature first and human being second, there were two people who were willing to walk up gently to the creature's cage that was locked from the inside and feed him through the bars, braving the danger. That metaphor doesn't work entirely, for again, this is a human being we're talking about here.)

(Sometimes, we need a reminder that we're all human every once in a while.)

And so they continued like this for quite some time.

The desert at night is a strange, strange place.

There is a general assumption that deserts are only wastelands, only endless stretches of strange heat-blasted sculptures and minutiae of sand that get up your nose and up your ass and into your pockets, sandals, everything you own. Which isn't entirely wrong. The sand is a constant, it is true, and the sun relentless.

But if you took your eyes off of the pages of your book that tries to do clumsily in words what can only be achieved by standing there firsthand, a.k.a teaching you history, you will be able to see that in fact, this strange place teems with life.

For on this strange, jewel-blue rock we call home, an impossibly precious and impossibly strange thing occurs.

In every nook and cranny, from almost every second since the lava cooled and rocks peeled off and the rains fell and soil decomposed and the very first sprout of ancient, decadent green, there has been life.

Even in the depths. Even in the wastelands.

Such was the case here. There was life in the extremes here, little plants and trees and mammals and lizards and insects and birds. Where the rain fell, briefly and horribly rarely it was true, but still fell nonetheless there were cacti and small succulents hugging the ground.

There was dew in the desert as well. It crept up from under the ground and let itself rest on the waxen petals of flowers- yes, there were flowers in the desert, although they only bloomed at night,

and they closed quickly before the sun rose to avoid being scorched.

The plants fed the various things that scampered and scuttled around the sands and the cracked stones of the ground. There were rabbits and foxes and the aforementioned lizards and snakes and scorpions and birds, but the ones that most people think of when they think of desert birds are vultures.

Vultures have a reputation in the wetlands for being dirty heretical scavengers. They can't even hunt for themselves, they are reduced to a skulking giant dirty menace with crusted blood around their face, feasting off of other animals' hard work. There is no honor in being the one left at the end fighting for the last scraps, or so they say.

The desert peoples, meanwhile, keep firmly to an entirely different stance.

In Pixandria, as you all may very well know, death is treated not as a thing to talk about behind closed doors but as a natural part of life. They speak about it with respect, of course, but quite openly.

Tending to the dead is (was? Oh. I'll just stick with "is" for now.) a serious and sacred task that is reserved for very specific people such as the Vigilkeeper, who went about his tasks of lighting the candles for those departed with no more ceremony than performing the duty solemnly and carefully. (Death is not glorified in Pixandria, nor is it particularly feared. It is simply there.)

As such, the creatures who take care of the corpse of those deceased, animals or otherwise, such as vultures, other scavengers, and even flies, are treated as sacred animals.

Shooing any one of these away from a corpse while it is eating would be akin to running up to Pix as he lit a candle at the Vigil and shoving him away from it. It is just not done.

The scavengers of the desert generally do not care for specifics when it comes to their meals. If an animal is dead or clearly dying, they will gather to feast, holding truce over this one fact of life. Then they disperse. The only exceptions to this are the monsters that come at night, for when felled their corpses dissipate quickly (as you have seen). Besides, the undead are generally not filling meals. They died long ago, and all of the important bits in them have long since rotted to pieces.

The undead in general are strange things in more ways than this. Grouped amongst the common wraiths and monsters that haunt the world, the most common way for them to come into being is the way that all other types of monsters do: suddenly and silently, and always behind one's back.

The undead are also the only type of monsters who have a natural progression of decay into other types of undead. The most generally accepted model of this starts off with the common zombies, which either go underwater and become Drowned after a long while or remain above ground and transform into skeletons (neutral temperature biomes), Husks (hot weather biomes), or Strays (cold weather biomes) as the bits surrounding the bones slowly drop off and decay.

After this, further decay progresses as the bones transform slowly into dust, although it is rare and skeletons are usually dismembered before they can reach this state.

This cycle of decay has been widely studied by academics the twelve Empires over, and is a commonly referred to model by students of biologies and other such processes.

There's an alternate model that exists, though, and while rarely acknowledged the research that does exist on it is sound.

This alternate model proposes that in this world, undead can not only "spawn in" from nowhere,

they can also be deprecated versions of previously fully living people in incredibly specific cases. It has been observed that vultures avoid these variants of undead as much as they do the common sort, although with a caveat of seeming generally more interested in them, watching from a safe distance without actually interacting.

I will now give you a fact about Pixl's wanderings in the desert: alongside following vultures to look for food sources, however raw and uncooked they may have been, in the later years they also tended to circle above him without attacking, looking from the safety of trees and from two yards away.

There is no way to explain this gently, but when Fwhip first saw Pix that night on the outskirts of the desert and mistook him for a husk, he wasn't entirely wrong in his assumption.

See, people do not turn into undead by accident, especially without dying. There is a reason that these cases are rare. It takes willing and severe self-neglect over a period of years or sometimes months in worse case scenarios to go from a fully realized human being to a literal zombie, a shell of what they formerly were, doomed to wander the land eternally if they are not gotten to in time. Because people do often go out looking for their loved ones who have been subjugated to this fate. They go looking for months. If the missing person is found, they are quite literally dragged back to the land of the living, often by their arm, and nursed back to health.

It was a stroke of incredible luck, then, that after eight years of radio silence, Pix was found and brought back and kept around without question, without complaint, even in his wordless state.

Such is the madness and beauty of love: to stare into the eyes of a ghost and say, you may not know me anymore but I knew you once and I know that I still care for you. To look at a half-dead man with a self-deprecating streak and say, I don't understand why you are doing this to yourself but until then I will help you live.

To stumble fresh out of an apocalypse, time slowly grinding to a halt, and choose, against logic and despair and apathy, to hold on fiercely to one you thought lost no matter how much it scares the both of you, is the reason we have gotten this far.

The world is not dead yet, no, not while we are still in it.

(These three and their stubborn hope, though they do not acknowledge it as hope, have singlehandedly kept this world alive.)

I draw you back now, gently, to the present, where a certain desert native is sitting on watch, foregoing sleep, foregoing food, for in his mind the condition has become unbearable and yet he would rather die again than accept help. He raised his voice to sit in this position, although I will not tell you the words he said for they are quite unlike the ones he normally uses and he regrets the outburst soon after.

This same man will, very soon, go against all anxious advice and eventually pleading from his family to, once again, be the one to guide a dragon into the night. He is sleep-deprived. He is hungry. He is grieving.

And behind him lies the vast, glittering past, studded with lives like dew drops in a spider's web, interconnected in thousands of ways that even a hundred years could never fully reveal. And behind him fly his friends and, truly, his family, anxious about him and for him.

They enter the open desert.

The leading dragon with one man piloting him begins to dip towards the ground.

Chapter End Notes

yo. sorry about the cliffhanger. it'll be resolved next chapter, don't worry.

i know a lot of you are going to be reading this end note with mouths wide open. i know that a lot of you are also not going to have the words or metaphors to describe the emotions you are feeling at this particular moment, and i just wanted to say that that's alright. whatever attempts you make, whether you feel they accurately convey those emotions or not, just know that i get it. i promise. i know what you're trying to say.

and usually we don't tease our readers, but since we've been building up to this for eight and a half months i'm giving myself a pass this one time to say: the next chapter is going to inspire the same emotions, if not More! enjoy!

i love and appreciate you all very much, sorry for putting you through this, time to start drafting the next chapter baybee

THINGS LEFT UNSAID

Chapter Summary

Under the slow, patient, unblinking moon, a man awakes from a heavy impact, a fresh crack in his carapace. A short time afterwards, finally, the soul within pours out.

Or,

Old griefs are laid out under clear desert skies, and we finally get a semi-lucid conclusion to the desperate yearning reach we've become so accustomed to over the months.

Chapter Notes

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

-Mary Oliver, *Wild Geese*

YOU WANT TO KNOW WHATS BEEN GOING ON WITH PIX? YOU WANT A GODDAMN CLIMAX?? WELL YOU'RE GETTING A FUCKING CLIMAX. HERE'S YOUR ANSWER. I HAVE BEEN WAITING EIGHT AND A HALF MONTHS TO WRITE THIS SCENE AND GOD CANNOT STOP ME NOW FOR I AM TOO POWERFUL. YOU ASKED FOR THIS! enjoy! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

(Okay. Let's set the scene.)

Our story continues during the end of the world. This is not the first time this has happened. The world has ended a million times before for a million different people, all prostrated on their knees and convinced that they would never, ever see the light of day again. For them, their lives were irreversibly changed. Some of them made it through bruised and battered but clutching their hopes to their chests, fiercely alive in a bright, sideways lanternlight sort of way. Some did not.

The important thing to remember with them is that, like beauty, life lies ever so idly in the eye of the beholder. Thus, when their life ends, so does their world. This is also not the first time this has happened.

So, you may ask, how do I know that this is *the* definitive end of the world and why? Not "an" or "a" or "one," THE. A three-letter word with a trillion different implications depending on which word in the sentence you stress. For example, *the* definitive end of the world is different from the *definitive* end of the world is different from the definitive *end* of the world and so on and so forth.

The answer, strangely enough, is actually quite simple. This is the end of the world, for real this

time, because seven billion nine hundred and ninety nine thousand nine hundred ninety nine takes later, after the curtains are called and the cameras are cut and the three remaining characters leave the setting, this place will be dead. Don't worry, we're not quite there yet- we have time, and a couple places to go first. Important scenes to cover. (We both know I wouldn't leave you hanging like that. I keep my promises.)

(But why dead?)

(Well, that's because this is a story. And in a setting in a story, when there are no more stories to tell, the setting loses all its meaning and simply ceases to exist afterwards. There's the past, of course, which can be explored, but from this point forth the door will be irreversibly locked and there will be no going back.)

(I'm getting ahead of myself.)

The sun had set, and in the middle of a sea of sand dunes which were flat in the way that the way the waves of the ocean were flat, which is to say not at all and in fact quite reminiscent of a mountain range, two dragons ambled around, sniffing at the ground. One had taken quite the strange landing and was still grumpily shaking sand out of his wing. The other remained unaffected, but cast worried glances at her charges, who stood nearby, clearly distressed.

Those charges- two siblings with hair the hue of red flame- knelt anxiously over a third man who lay flat on his back with closed eyes, hair spread abruptly to one side and sand scattered over his skin and his clothes. If it weren't for the bizarreness of his pose and the items scattered around him, he'd almost look peaceful.

"Oh my gods," said Gem under her breath, checking his pulse with two fingers. She sighed in relief. "Still beating. Okay. We're good."

"Pix," said Fwhip in an awed voice to the still yet unconscious man, "respectfully, what the *fuck* were you thinking?"

"You know," said Gem, "when you said we should be keeping an eye on him, I also thought that covered keeping things like this from happening."

"It does!" said Fwhip. "I just thought that, I dunno..." He gestured vaguely towards Pixl, sentence trailing off. "Scratch that. I don't think I was thinking at all, actually."

"Well, at least you're self-aware," said Gem with a sigh. She poked Pix gently in the arm once, and his fingers twitched.

"Give him a minute to wake up," said Fwhip, gently punching his sister on the arm. He sighed. "If Pix wasn't, well, Pix, I'd be chewing him out as soon as he woke up."

"I don't think that'd be a very good idea anyways," mused Gem. "He does seem a bit... fragile, doesn't he?"

Fwhip looked over to stare his sister dead in the eyes, serious and solemn as a funeral. "You remember the past few months, yeah?"

"Yep."

"You know just as well as I do that this guy is dealing with some BULLshit. Like, capital B Bullshit. And for some reason, he's beating himself up over it. I hate it. So I would also say that he's fragile, yeah, but we sort of knew that the whole time."

"That's fair," conceded Gem. "Your point being?"

"I don't have one. I just wish it was easier," said Fwhip quietly, still looking at Pixl. He stretched one hand out towards him uncertainly, leaving it hovering a few inches above his chest.

"Whatcha doing?" asked Gem, still checking intermittently for a pulse just to make sure nothing too bad had happened.

"I uh," said Fwhip hesitantly, drawing his hand back a little. He coughed. "I want to give him a hug, but y'know..." He waved his hands vaguely in front of him.

"But what?" asked Gem. She paused a moment. "Fwhip. You've held him before. You know I don't care. It's fine. I'll help you get him up."

"It's not you," said Fwhip frustratedly. "It's just that- augh." He put his head in his hands, trying to think. "It's like. For some stupid reason my brain thinks it'd be weird if I did it? Like it'd be too intimate or whatever?"

"That's really stupid," said Gem.

"I *know*," said Fwhip, despairing. "He literally saved my fucking life. I don't know why my mind's getting hung up over a literal hug instead."

Luckily for Fwhip, he was spared from the agony of having to make that decision by Pixl choosing that moment to groan slightly and rub his eyes, still laying down.

"Hey, you-" started Fwhip.

"Don't," said Gem. "Don't say it."

"Hey, you," said Fwhip, cheerfully ignoring his sister. "You're finally awake."

"I'm going back to sleep just for that joke," said Pix, putting both arms over his eyes. "Zero out of ten. Not worth it."

"No, get up," said Gem gently but firmly. "Come on." She tugged at one of his arms. "You took one hell of a hit there."

Fwhip startled and stared at her in shock as she helped Pixl up and shook her head slightly. "You had us both incredibly worried," she said with concern, sitting back at arm's length and looking him over critically. "Are you feeling okay? Does anything hurt?"

"Well, a lot of things hurt," said Pix nonchalantly in the same tone that one would discuss the weather. He pulled one sleeve a little further down his arm. "You'll have to be more specific."

"Dude, you fell off of a literal dragon," said Fwhip. "This isn't the time to be funny." He frowned a little, eyes hardening. "Seriously. You nearly gave us both a heart attack."

"Not exactly, but we *were* really worried about you," said Gem. She sighed. "I don't think we can avoid this anymore."

"Yeah, no," said Fwhip. He waved one hand. "Pix, buddy, you've been acting weird ever since we got back into the desert- not taking care of yourself, dropping these ominous hints, acting all cagey- we're getting worried. What's going on?"

Pixl blinked.

To be fair, he *had* just woken up, but he just silently looked from Fwhip to Gem in confusion. "Well, I did land a little heavily on my shoulder," he said, raising it up and down slowly. "But... back up, you said I was worrying you?" His voice took on a concerned and strangely fearful tone, and Fwhip and Gem glanced at each other before looking back to him.

"Yeah, dude, you have," Fwhip said slowly. "The way you've been acting and treating us? Not normal. And to be completely honest, it's sort of started to stress me out." He scratched behind his head awkwardly.

Meanwhile, Pix simply sat there, realization dawning on his face as he combed through the implications one by one and tied them all together into a noose that he could choke on if he wanted. He looked at the rope. He looked at the situation. He looked at the gods and he looked at his hands.

"Let me get this right," he said carefully, blood going ever so slightly chill as the dread settled in, mind starting to chatter and hammer out the warning tones he'd whistled along to for so long. "You're saying that what I've been doing has been hurting you?" It was a tentative question, almost childlike in its hint of fear and even possibly hurt.

Gem winced, hair swinging as she looked to the side. (Even now, it was still longer on one side than the other. I doubt she'll ever get that fixed.) "I wouldn't say that," she started tentatively, "but..."

The silence was deafening, or maybe that was just the ringing in their ears.

Pixl stood, face grim. (Atlas rose.) "Well then," he said in a clear, oddly neutral tone, the sort of voice that was perfectly balanced in the way that room temperature water was. The sort of tone you barely noticed until it was too late. The sort of words you could choke on. He swayed a little on his feet as he stepped backwards in the same sandals Fwhip had made for him months ago. (He'd never taken them off, not even to sleep. He'd taken a string and tied them to his ankles so that he'd never lose them.)

"Pix, what are you doing?" asked Fwhip warningly.

"Leaving," said Pix simply, as if that one word were the most natural thing in the world, as if it were somehow the most bitter as well. He exhaled, bouncing minimally on his toes as well as he could. "It's been nice. And I'm sorry about this, I really am. But this just solidifies things." He waved his hand behind him, in the direction of the vast and empty stretches of dunedust.

"Wait," said Fwhip, scrambling to his feet. "What? *What?* Pix, wait. Hold on a second. Why would you- what?"

Pix just looked over his shoulder at him, a resigned look, a dead look, solemn, impartial. It hit Fwhip suddenly that it looked familiar, and then he realized that it was the exact same look Pix had had in his eyes when they'd first found him.

(So it all comes 'round in the end, then, like most things do.)

(Typical.)

"You said it yourself," he said, voice low and hard and unfathomably bitter. "I've been hurting you. And neither of you deserve that." He shrugged halfheartedly. "So, I'm going."

Gem stood up as well as he started to walk off. "Wait," she said desperately. "I never said that." Pix paused and turned slightly to look at her, one eyebrow raised. "We just meant that because you

weren't taking care of yourself, it was making things harder for us."

"Great move," grumbled Fwhip as Pix turned back to where he was going and continued walking towards the silent horizon. "That definitely helped."

"Well, what else was I supposed to do?" asked Gem in a furious whisper.

"I don't know," replied Fwhip in a low tone bubbling with anger. "Anything but that!"

"Well then, if you have such a grand idea of what to say, go on and do it yourself," Gem whispered back. "Go! Fix this whole thing!"

"I never said-" started Fwhip heatedly. He broke off midsentence as he watched Pix trudge off, desperation and a silent keening grief building in his eyes. "We don't have time for this," he said, half to himself. "We don't fucking have time for- okay. Okay."

"What?" asked Gem, deadpan, folding her arms.

"I don't know what's going on but I have something that might work," said Fwhip with an exhale, walking forwards.

Consider a black hole. Consider matter spinning ever closer, ever inwards towards it. The universe is 10% tangible things we can see and feel, that interact with us and our planets, and the other 90% is all elaborately structured guesswork, lattices of laced string theory studded with brightly glowing question marks and uncertainties.

Consider a metaphor, the empty space between lines of a poem. Consider the matter reaching very oh so very close to the event horizon; time slows, the poem unspools gently and lapses comfortably into lines of prose. The brain constructs a universe and flits deftly within it as a dragonfly darts between flowers standing tall like statues to some arcane and silently brilliant god that accepts no seconds, takes her dues in repentance.

(Repent means "the pain again". Anne Carson said that.)

If this didn't work, nothing would.

"If you're gonna leave," said Fwhip as loudly as he could, hoping his voice carry, "then I'm going with you."

Pix paused in his tracks.

"I don't care if you go on foot. I don't care where you want to go. If you want to stay, then fine." He paused, chest suddenly tightening. "I'd sit right here in the sand and watch the stars fall out of the sky when the world ends just because you were there too."

Behind him, Gem was silent as she often was not. Fwhip knew she had nothing to say. He didn't care. He didn't know what he himself was saying. He didn't care. He just knew it was the truth.

A pause, and the tension was there asphyxiating in the clear air, you could reach out and grab fistfuls of the stuff. Shove it down your throat. Choke on the waiting and anxiety and hope.

Pix was silent as he often was. Fwhip did not care if he never spoke again. He did not turn around.

"Why?" he asked.

Fwhip laughed because any other sound would not make sense right now. He had to play the cards

right. "You show up and we feed you our food and gave you a seat on the dragons," he said. "All those nights spent keeping you alive. Remember those? I know you do. You fell asleep leaning on me and Gem. You have seen the worst of us combined. You know how much of a fucking mess all three of us are. And you stuck with us."

Pix was still standing there, unmoving. Fwhip started up the dune he was standing on top of.

"A secret for a secret," he said. "I'll go first if you promise to tell us one in exchange."

(He didn't actually care if Pixl said anything in response or not. He'd just tacked on that last bit to make sure he would afterwards.)

Behind him, Gem was still silent, oh so dreadfully silent. Silence of a girl in a world of titans. Silence of those caught under a huge metaphorical boot. He waved one hand forwards, inviting her up. If she was going to be silent, he'd make sure that she'd be at least be with them.

Boots whispered as they made their way up the dune, and Fwhip made his way rather clumsily up as well to stand besides Pix. All three standing there, staring into the night.

(Fwhip was reminded of a similar scenario he'd witnessed so many months ago, back when the silence was a given and not a question mark.)

(I thought you'd left.)

"You asked me about that explosion thing in the cave," he said. "Well, long story short, that explosion basically caused a series of earthquakes that kicked off the Rapture that landed us in this whole situation."

He could feel Pix look over at him and he did not let his eyes stray from the horizon. "Tried to make an alliance with Jimmy. Did it in the stupidest way possible and ended up causing the end of the world." He sighed. "And it doesn't make it any easier knowing that I was basically destined to fuck up from the start of humanity or whatever. They might not have known exactly what the ancient evil was back then, but it didn't matter, because it was the demon the whole time and I'm the one who unleashed him." He exhaled, looking at the ground. "That's it," he said.

(These words like planets, tiny pinpricks of stars in the eternal silence of the void. See them floating there.)

(Now lean in close, lend me your ears and open your heart a little more. Let me spin you a galaxy.)

He sat on the sand with a sigh, Gem plopping down next to him and rubbing his back as reassurance. Pixl remained standing, hands unclenching slightly as he stared off into that distance that he obviously wished to disappear into, like a wraith, like a ghost.

"It's not your fault," he said.

Fwhip looked up, not expecting that answer nor the gruffness it was cloaked in.

"You didn't know what it'd bring," he said, still staring off into that middle distance. Tension still caught between his shoulderblades. "You were just doing the best with the limited information you were doing." He sighed. "I just thought I'd let you know that, since you seemed pretty caught up on it."

"...Thank you," responded Fwhip, surprised but warmed. It was a little glimpse of warmth in a

cold, cold night. Pix nodded as he dropped heavily into a sitting position as well. Fwhip waited a short while, fiddling with his hands, watching the awkwardness grow in intensity around him. Or maybe that was just him. Either way, he sighed silently before looking up again.

"A secret for a secret, remember?" he said. "That was mine."

Pix sighed deeply. "I can't," he said, face dropping to rest on his palms.

"Why?" pressed Fwhip. "There's nothing so bad-"

"You keep saying that," said Pix, frustration building in his voice. "But I don't think you know just what that means."

"You heard me earlier," said Fwhip. "We would stay with you to the end of the world. Whatever you say, we won't leave."

The Copper King's face dropped into his hands and he was still for a long moment, wrestling with something Fwhip could not see nor name. He held his breath. If he messed this up, he might not get another chance to finally figure out what was going on.

Pixl sat up slowly, rising to his full posture. (Almost like one rising from a grave or a deathbed would.) He looked over at Fwhip and Gem, and if his look before was serious then it was nothing compared to now.

"Do you promise?" he asked. "Do you promise that whatever you learn won't cause you to leave?"

"Yes," said Fwhip, at the same time that Gem said "we promise."

Pixl's gaze flitted from one of them to the other, wary, tired. Silently, he rubbed his eyes with his fingers.

"Are you okay?" asked Gem.

"Yeah, just, bear with me here," he responded with a sigh. "Please just hear me out."

Fwhip nodded and waited as patiently as he could without his heart exploding in his fucking chest.

The first word came slowly, dispassionately, fighting against his brain before lingering a horribly long time in the air.

"I-"

He hesitated, anxiety and shame consuming him, vision darkening. He couldn't do this. He couldn't fucking do this.

"Take your time," said Gem gently. "It's okay. We're here. We're not leaving."

Pix forced himself to breathe in, then out. He had made a promise. He'd put his foot in this over a decade ago. Now it was time to push the needle through, firmly stitch up the wound that had been festering in his head and his heart and his soul.

"The End fight," he started clumsily, voice thickening. No. Focus. Clearer. "The one where we killed the dragon and Xornoth broke loose." He exhaled shakily. "I was the one that broke so many of the crystals and struck the final blow. You were there. You both saw it."

He let his head rest in his hands, waiting for a rebuke, a mockery, anything, *anything*. For he had produced his own damnation here and read it aloud.

But there was nothing. Maybe he hadn't explained enough.

"And it put everyone in danger," he continued hastily, looking up, words coming fast and tripping over each other. "You know what it did. The whole- I changed my name to better fit my people. I couldn't go back there. I'd let every single one of them down." When had his breaths come so ragged? "I failed." Head was back in hands now. Gods, he was a mess. "That's it. That's everything. You can go now."

He could not move and he could not breathe. In his mind, the same damned images played over and over, nerves being cut in half with blunt scissors before stitching themselves back together again- if he could die on the spot right here, right now, surely that'd be kinder. Surely.

"Pix," he heard through the static. "It's okay. Hey. Look at me."

"I can't," he said between gasps. "I can't."

"Okay," came another voice, more soothingly. He held onto it like a lifeline. "Is it okay if we touch you?"

He thought about it a split second before nodding yes. He'd completely forgotten how he'd gotten here. If only he could just get out of his brain. If only he could just leave.

One arm, thin but strong, was looped over his shoulder. "Can you hear me?" he heard faintly, from a thousand miles away.

It hurt to think. He did not even want to consider the state he was in. But he could hear, yes, and it was a distraction alongside the arm that rested on his back. He wished they did not have to see him like this.

"Listen, okay," said the first voice again. "That whole thing wasn't your fault either."

Pix laughed hollowly. "It literally was, but okay," he said.

"No," said the voice firmly. "Pix. You didn't know what you were going to bring when you did it, right?"

He tried to focus on breathing in and out, in and out. It was easier now. He held onto that touch, those voices. "Yes, but-

"You said you were tired of dying to the void. I heard you. You just wanted to get home."

(Gods, how he wished to be home.)

(He couldn't hear it, but Fwhip's voice was desperate. Pained. Not because it was difficult to hear these things, well, it was, but it was harder to see his brother like this.)

"What," he asked thickly, finally looking up and over at Fwhip, "does that change about the fact that I basically ushered in the end of the world?"

"Because you didn't know," he said. "Gods, Pix, you didn't know. It's like what you told me. You were doing the best with what you had. It's not your fault. You were just caught in a shitty situation."

"But it's different," Pix said, looking at his nose to avoid looking at his eyes. "You do know that it's different, right?"

"Come on," said Fwhip with a half-laugh. "You were so quick to forgive me. Why won't you forgive yourself?"

And with that, for the first time in a long time, Pix was shocked into silence. He looked over at Gem, who wore an expression so gentle and pitying he almost had to look away.

"It's been over a decade," she said softly. "I can't imagine- you've been carrying that alone the *whole time*?"

Pix nodded mutely.

Gem sighed. "Why didn't you tell us?" she asked gently, two of her hands clasping one of his. "It would have been so much easier. We could have helped you."

"Because-" he started hesitantly, then broke off and tried again, voice breaking. "Because then I'd be a burden, right? And I don't want to- I don't want to be that. I don't want to do that to you."

"Oh," said Gem softly, leaning towards him. She opened her arms and he leaned forwards a bit, Fwhip also hugging him from the back. "Come here. You don't need to worry about that, okay?"

He nodded mutely into her shoulder, tears starting to burn at the corners of his eyes. Not here. Not here.

"You," Gem said, "are a burden we are willing to bear."

...Oh.

Oh.

(And suddenly, the clouds broke above that little island in his mind.)

With a half-laugh half-sob, Pixl allowed himself to take one breath before dissolving entirely.

There's not really a poetic way to describe a catharsis like this, because it's so powerful and so complex that the very thing constitutes a poem in itself.

The closest I've ever heard it be described is: it hurts. Bad. But in a good way.

In that tiny space between deep love and deep pain, three travelers sat, all jumbled together in a pile of arms and hugs and tears. (All three of them were crying at least a little bit. It'd be useless to try and deny it.)

In the center of it all, Pix was latched on tight to Gem, and if his body was held together by emotions alone and not just physics, he'd have broken completely apart by now. He did not quite know what was going on. He was fine with that at the minute. All he was certain of was two things: one, that he loved and was loved, and had been for a very long time. And two, that he had been ignoring that love the entire time and was probably a little bit stupid for it.

"I'm sorry," he said, although he didn't know if the words got out or not. He was just tired at this point, letting Gem hold him up and letting his mind clear for the first time in ages.

"It's okay," said Fwhip from somewhere behind him, his voice sounding rather thick as well. He

sniffled. "Gods. I didn't know I was allergic to sand."

That just made Gem laugh, high and clear like a bell ringing. "Shut up," she told him. "It's okay. We're all crying."

"Crying?" asked Pix, sitting up and wiping the tears from his eyes and the snot from his nose. He let out a wheeze that was still halfway a sob. "Who said anybody was crying?"

And then he got knocked backwards into the sand by Fwhip tackling him with a Fwhip-sized hug, which although it wasn't much in size, it more than made up for in force and emotion.

Suffice it to say, it was a minute before all three of them had calmed down again.

They all sat there in a little line, Pix in the middle, and looked at the horizon, a little out of breath, a little lighter.

"First things first before we do anything else," said Gem, turning to the other two. "I think we should at least have some of communication going forwards."

"Yeah," agreed Fwhip. "Like. For example, not repressing thing for months on end and letting it slowly take you over while not saying anything." He raised his hands as the other two looked at him. "I'm just saying!"

"Yeah, no, you're right," said Pix with a sigh. "But first, I'd like to just say, sorry."

"For?" Gem prompted.

"Uh," said Pix, counting on his fingers, "let's see, being silent for three months, being cold towards you two-

"Running in front of that bear and also not eating," said Fwhip.

"And just generally not taking care of yourself," added Gem.

Pix nodded awkwardly. "And that," he said, scratching the back of his head. "I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that because I wasn't taking care of myself, that was putting more stress on you guys...?"

The other two nodded, and he put his face in his hands. Gem patted his back reassuringly. "I have got to be the *stupidest* man alive right now."

"No self deprecation," said Gem firmly.

"Yeah," agreed Fwhip. "Also, the title of 'stupidest man alive' goes to me, we all know that."

"You do have a point there," said Pix with a grin, sitting up. "But there's one place I want to go before we shelter for the night again."

"Where?" asked Gem curiously.

"You'll see when we get there," said Pix.

"I thought we weren't hiding anything from each other anymore," said Fwhip.

"Not hiding," said Pix. He hesitated. "Just... trust me, okay?"

"Alright," said Gem, getting to her feet and heading down the dune towards the dragons. "But you're going to eat something first before you go."

Chapter End Notes

this is the most difficult chapter I have ever written, for several reasons.

not only did it cover a very important part of the plot- yknow, the whole conversation- but also had a Lot of moving parts in it and some really specific points I wanted to get to. i think this is the fifth draft i've written? i'm just going to stick with it and post it even though i'm not too happy with the second half cos yknow fuck it we ball and all that

i'm also pretty sure that this is the longest chapter i've ever written so there's that too!

uh. i ran out of words. hope you enjoyed :] the next chapter will also be very fun!

OH YEAH ALSO HI SEVERAL HPURS AFTER THIS CHAPTER WAS POSTED KEYS HERE. we are going to the beach this weekend!!! idk when we'll get back. there's almost definitely gonna be a short pause on ashes updates as we chill out and also i want to make sure i handle these last bits of the story as carefully as i can because it carries some messages and themes that are incredibly important to us. thank u all muah <3

Caught Betwixt Fight and Flight (The Stand and the Return)

Chapter Summary

They visit Pixandria. Some discoveries are made.

Or,

A cycle is broken.

Chapter Notes

this chapter was written in like three hours on a car ride to the beach so i hope it holds up alright lol

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pixl was silent as they flew due east.

He'd mentioned offhandedly while hoisting himself onto Odysseus that he might be, still weary from hunger and tears.

"Why?" Fwhip had asked, jumping up behind him. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," Pixl had mentioned, somewhat distantly. "Just have a lot to think about."

And when Gem overheard and looked over worriedly, he had shot her a look. And when Fwhip had raised an eyebrow in disbelief behind him, Pix had turned around to look at him with eyes that were brighter than he had seen in years, the dull grey sheen of the past few months almost completely gone from them even in this dusk, and Fwhip had shut his mouth.

They hadn't been flying long- perhaps fifteen minutes- before Fwhip could faintly make out a huge rise in the distance, more jagged and low-lying than the mountains that comprised the horizon. As they got closer, Pixl tensed but banked to the left, circling around in a wide radius to land on a flat stretch of sand a few hundred feet from a sizeable cluster of buildings that lay at the Anthill's feet like dropped pebbles.

Pixandria, the jewel of the desert, had gone completely dark.

Gem came walking over as fast as she could over the sand as Pixl stepped off of Odysseus and simply stood there facing it.

"Pix," she said as soon as she was within speaking distance, "are you sure it's safe for you to be here?"

"The ground seems stable enough," said Pix, testing the sand with his feet.

"You know that's not what I meant," said Gem. (Fwhip watched from behind, still sitting on

Odysseus, unsure of where he would stand if he got off.) "Is it safe for you?"

Pixl hesitated, considering, and Fwhip hopped off of Odysseus, jogging over to join the group. "Why'd you bring us here if you knew it was going to hurt you?" he asked.

"Because-" Pix paused, clearly struggling for words. "Because I had to face it. Because I know it won't be dangerous for me. Will it hurt? Probably. But it'll hurt in a forwards way, not a backwards way, if that makes any sense." He sighed. "I can't explain it any better than that right now."

(Because in avoiding this place during all of his wanderings, he still held it in his orbit: in the desperate wishing to leave it as thoroughly as he could, he had made it the center of his life once again.)

(And because he still loved this place, despite the grief it had caused him, for grief is yet love that held on.)

(Because he had to.)

Gem nodded slowly as if she really did understand, still unsold. "But why now?"

"Because if I don't do it now, I'll never get the chance to again," said Pix, turning to face the city again.

"Okay, well," said Fwhip, unsure really of what to do in this situation. "If you're sure, I guess?"

"I just need to ask," said Pixl, walking forwards a few steps and turning back to face them, face serious, "do you trust me?"

"What?"

"Do you trust me?"

"I-" Fwhip paused. "Yeah. Yeah, I do."

"Yes," said Gem, looking Pixl straight in the eye.

"Okay," said Pix with a nod, stepping backwards a little. "I'm- I'm going to go in there. You can keep the time, right?"

Gem nodded.

"If I'm not out within fifteen minutes," he continued, "then come in after me."

"Okay," said Gem.

And with a nod and a visible gathering of courage, the Copper King walked towards his city.

"Wait," called Fwhip. "Pix."

With a pause, Pixl looked over his shoulder.

"Don't do anything stupid," said Fwhip. "At least not without me there."

The Copper King smiled, and just like that he was just Pix again. "Will do," he said.

Fwhip waited until he had disappeared behind a building before he looked over at Gem, who was

watching Pix go with folded arms. “Why’d he ask us for permission to go inside?”

Gem shrugged.

“And what did he mean by backwards hurt?” he continued. “Makes no sense.”

“Sometimes you have to face a thing and it really sucks but you have to do it to move forwards,” said Gem airily, not taking her eyes off of the city. “Sometimes a thing just hurts and has a long term bad impact.”

“Huh,” said Fwhip. “I guess that makes sense. Okay.”

Gem laughed a little as she looked over, patting him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry,” she said reassuringly. “You’ll understand it when you’re older.”

“Gem, I’m not a kid anymore. I’m 32. ”

“And?” asked Gem. “You still have plenty to learn.”

With a sigh, Fwhip looked towards Pixandria again. In the thin sliver of moon that swept across the sky, he could see next to nothing- just shadows of walls and roofs and the huge lurking bulk of the Anthill behind. He knew these places, having been here. It wasn’t strange. But the darkness was.

In every visit that Fwhip had ever made to Pixandria over the years, whether in daylight or during nightfall, the city had always glowed with some internal light. Small lamps shone in the windows. The city shone rose gold with the light of sunrise and sunset. And above all, day and night, the Vigil flickered gently.

Now, all was dark. It felt wrong in the way that a silent church was wrong: sacrilegious and just somehow off in some way that could not be felt except for deep in the soul.

“I think it’s been fifteen minutes,” said Gem, looking closely for any sign of a shadow exiting the city buildings. “Hasn’t it?”

“I think so,” said Fwhip, who was notoriously bad at telling time. “Maybe we should wait just a little bit I-”

“Come on,” interrupted Gem, walking towards the nearest building. Fwhip had no choice but to follow. With a sigh, he let her guide him in, though he was soon the one leading, for she was unfamiliar with the winding streets.

Checking every house and shop for Pix, Fwhip had his head stuck into a small dye shop before he heard a small gasp and the quick clicking of boot heels on paved streets. He ran after his sister to the central square (which was actually rather round), where the Vigil rose tall and unbroken and starkly, horribly dark.

And at its feet, half-draped over one of the stone lips that surrounded the structure, its last prophet knelt silently weeping.

Where once his hair had been well-kept and a light chestnut brown, it had darkened and tangled over the years, shot through with grey. Where once his cloak had been carefully kept, its edges gleaming, it now fell off of him in dirty, ragged heaps. And where once Pix had stood tall and postured, a solemn image of grace, he now lay bedraggled and half-broken at the feet of that which he had tried so hard to avoid.

(Nothing like a familiar setting and a familiar face with a few years' space between then and now to really highlight differences between what is and what had been.)

Fwhip ran over to Pixl and knelt beside him, looking up at the Vigil. All of the candles around it had gone dark as well, even the ones that represented those present. Fwhip's heart stopped for a second. "Wait," he said, throat tensing. "Does that mean that-"

"No," said Pix, voice slightly hoarse. He sat with an effort and dried his tears with the back of one sleeve. "You're not dead. None of us are. Whatever power kept them lit has just... left."

"But why?" asked Gem, looking up. She started to climb over the short barrier that the candles rested on and quick as a whip, Pix looked up and grabbed the back of her dress to stop her from going any further.

"You do not," he said quietly and warningly, "touch the Vigil."

"Even if it's dark?" Gem asked, scrambling back over the divide.

"*Especially* if it's dark," said Pix.

Gem looked over, startled by the hint of a threat in his voice, but said nothing. Pixl got to his feet and so did Fwhip, both looking up at the darkened structure before them.

"So we can go now?" asked Fwhip, stepping back a little. "Did you do everything you needed to?"

"No, not everything," said Pixl, looking down and behind him to where his house was. "There's just one last thing I need to do. Wait here." He strode in and Gem and Fwhip waited outside, fidgeting, looking around for movement.

"It's just empty," said Gem. "No damage or anything. Nothing stolen, far as I can tell. It's like everybody just left."

"They probably did," said Fwhip, thinking about what he'd seen inside the houses he'd checked: the books that still lay open on tables, the unmade beds. The pans in sinks. What had been lost. What had been left behind. What these people had done to survive against all.

Pixl walked out of his house with a bag slung crossbody over one shoulder and with different clothes on his back: darker and more casual, the jacket and pants he had worn a lifetime ago before he had taken on the title of king and was merely just an heir, when the sand-colored cloak was reserved for special occasions only, when things had been simpler.

Despite the wardrobe change, though, he was still clearly the same man beneath: the hair was still long and laced with grey, the beard still unkempt as ever. Eyes still the same blue.

Gem turned to stare at him, and he looked down at the ground, suddenly slightly embarrassed. "I figured I may as well finally change out of those, since I hadn't washed them in years," he said, still not looking up.

"Dude, it's fine," said Fwhip. "You look fine." He laughed a little. "Man, I haven't seen that jacket in forever!"

"I know, right?" asked Pixl, looking up with a twinkle in his eye. "It's almost as old as I am."

"We should probably go," said Gem. "Morning will be here soon."

“Yeah,” said Fwhip, walking back towards the dragons and occasionally checking behind him to make sure that Pixl was still there. He was walking slightly behind, looking at the shops and the homes that he himself had helped build.

Fwhip and Gem hopped atop their dragons, checking the reins to make sure nothing had gotten tangled. Pixl climbed on behind Fwhip, getting himself comfortable, and as the two rose into the quickly lightening sky, neither of them saw Pix staring behind him until the city had faded out of sight and even then long after, whispering a silent goodbye over and over.

In the dream, he was 29.

Pixl stood on an obsidian platform holding his trident, looking up at the island above him. Around him stood his friends and enemies, his allies and his adversaries.

“Pix, are you alright?” asked Jimmy from beside him.

Pixl exhaled. “Yeah,” he said, not looking over. “Just a bit nervous.”

“-cod head is here,” said Fwhip, flying down to hand it to Jimmy, who shoved it onto his head with an annoyed huff.

“Let’s go!” cheered Sausage, launching into the sky with all the force and grace of a juvenile bird that had just learned to fly. With a small chuckle and a sigh, Pix stepped forwards through the porous rock of the island, emerging on the top as a traitor and a king. He looked up to where the Dragon was surely circling above, even as arrows flew and crystals shrieked as they were blown apart.

His vision sheared at the edges, a low warning burst of static, and he put a hand up to his forehead to steady the crackle.

He would go along with it this time. After the night he’d had, it would be easier to just get it over with.

With a silent sigh, Pixl raised his bow and let an arrow fly.

The fight continued like how he remembered it: thin air and trident launches, the water propelling him far into the air. The whistle of arrows. The mad laughter of Sausage. Every move bringing a fresh wave of fear, but Pix held steady.

He had done this before.

And eleven years on, he stood on the ground on his own two feet as a changed man.

Eventually, the Dragon could fly no longer and stumbled around weakly on the ground, legs shaking, roar quiet and pained but filled with no less anger. Pix knew he would be taken soon. His breath came harder, chest seizing up, but still he walked forwards-

The dream thinned, settled into static, but not the panicked static of a panic attack: this was the strange in-between static of a world's veil being pierced. Beyond, Pix could vaguely hear someone speaking in a low and worried tone, feel his body being lifted gently but with an effort. Warm arms wrapped around his back, and in the space between sleeping and waking, he looked that dragon in its eyes.

You were just doing the best with what you had.

He could not change the past, but what he could do was change the way it affected him.

(If you could do it all again, change the outcome, would you ask Fate to reset that portion of your life?)

(Lose everything you've done since then?)

(Is it worth it?)

"I'm not alone this time," he said to the dragon, walking closer, the island dissolving around him. He raised his sword, and the dragon coughed up a weak spurt of purple flames at him. "I really am sorry about this. I have been for a while." Resting the tip of his sword between two neck scales, he sighed. "But I guess I've been going about it the wrong way."

The sword went down, his retinas filled with light, and the last thing Pix remembered as he dived towards the pool of scintillated light surrounded by the bones of the Earth was the sound of the world breaking right behind him.

His fingers dipped below the surface.

He woke up in somebody's arms, sun setting somewhere behind him.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter was originally going to have a part in it that i ended up moving to the next chapter because of. idk thematic reasons. but yeah don't worry yall can breathe a little easier now :] the next chapter's gonna be way more chill i think

Here's a Health to the Company

Chapter Summary

Within spitting distance of the portal out, the crew takes a short break to discuss their plans.

Or,

You'll have to pry this rest from their cold, dead hands.

Chapter Notes

chapter titled after the song of the same name by The Longest Johns!

hey folks sorry about the chapter delay i crashed hard for two weeks went on my period and chilled out a bit while working on the ashes website and binging mumbo jumbo's hermitcraft s6 series. we vibin though! feels good to be back and making some progress again i love writing this fic so much :D

and yes you are all going to get some fluff this chapter. @ashes!pixl get held idiot

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pixl shifted slightly, still very much barely awake, and whoever was holding him sat up a little straighter in response. He didn't particularly care who that person was right now. The memory of the nightmare was still fresh in his mind, and although he balked slightly from it, his flailing mind calmed a little at the comfort and gentle luxury of being held. He opened his eyes a little to see a sandstone wall and floor hewn by decades of grit and wind- his head had been resting on the shoulder of whoever he was leaning against- and his back was warm, most likely from the sun that had been shining on it. He took a deep breath, tucking his face a little closer into their shoulder. Sweat and warmth, a familiar blend.

"You good?" asked the person. Sounded like Fwhip. "Looked like you were having a nightmare."

Pix yawned a little, still in that warm, peaceful space between sleeping and waking. "I was," he mumbled. "'M alright now, though. Thank you for asking."

"Okay, awesome," said Fwhip, sitting up a little straighter. "Do you need me to let go now, or-"

In response, Pix scooted closer and hugged him back, too tired to even respond with a no, already drifting back to sleep. Far, far off somewhere, beyond the vague veil of slumber, he could hear Gem's tinkling laughter, and he dimly tried to recall the last time he'd heard it. A while. Possibly even Before.

You can think about that later, he told himself. There's no way I'm staying awake for much longer.

The last thing he remembered, held there gently like a kid being carried to bed by their parent, was a sort of warm, sleepy golden peace like the sort you felt falling asleep in the back of the car home as a kid, streetlamps flashing their familiar patterns over your closed eyes and your arms and your legs, every turn home familiar and practiced, and a gentle ache in his chest rose slowly that was more sweet than bitter and that he rested in like one would in their bed at night.

Fwhip just sort of sat there as Gem giggled at him under her breath. He looked from the sleeping man in his arms, tilted awkwardly between the floor and the wall, to his sister and then back again.

"You did say you wanted this earlier," said Gem, repressed laughter deep in her voice. "I don't think you can complain."

"I'm not," protested Fwhip, lowering his voice as so to not wake Pixl up. "I just wasn't expecting..."

"Pix to cling onto you like a panda?" asked Gem.

"Shut up," said Fwhip, glowering at the floor. "Yes, but also, shut up."

"Fwhip, you know I'm just teasing," said Gem, dropping the banter from her voice. "I think it's sweet. Besides, we both know he needs the rest."

"Yeah," said Fwhip, hoisting Pix up a little more so that he could rest more solidly on his shoulder. "He does. And I also know that he really needs a hug."

"Mhm," said Gem, leaning back a little. She was against a wall adjacent to where Fwhip was, the setting sun shining almost directly into his eyes. The two had rested behind two pillars during the day. "Kind of reminds me of the evening you figured out Sausage was your blood brother and the three of us were up for hours talking and then you passed out on his shoulder on the couch."

Fwhip paused for a minute, remembering. "Yeah," he said with a small laugh. "It is sorta like that." He dropped his gaze from the roof of the enclave they were in to look at Gem slightly awkwardly. "By the way, speaking of Sausage, how are you... like, are you doing okay? You've been pretty quiet."

Gem shrugged. "I've been thinking about it," she said. "I think it's going to take a while for me to really process it. It'll be hard, that's for sure. I'm feeling better now that it's in the open. I think once we're out, things will get better."

"Nice," said Fwhip. "That's good to hear."

"What about you?" asked Gem. "It doesn't seem like you were affected by what happened that much."

Fwhip sighed, rubbing one of his eyes with the back of his hand. "I was tired," he said with a half laugh. "I don't really remember much. I had other things on my mind at the time. And anyways, like I said earlier, Sausage really was your brother first." He shrugged. "It'll hit me one day, that's for sure. But until then? I'm chillin'."

"Fair," said Gem, glancing over at the sun, which was more than halfway behind the nearest mountain's peak by now. "We're gonna have to wake Pixl up again soon if we want to make it to the portal in time."

“Man,” said Fwhip, looking down at where Pix lay, sleeping peacefully. “I really don’t want to.” From this angle, he could only really see the top of Pixl’s nose and the way his hair swept in a million different directions over his shoulders, but his breathing was deep and rhythmic, shoulders relaxed. It hit him then how vulnerable Pix was, how intimate this entire scene was, but fought down the wave of embarrassment that came with the thought. Fwhip knew himself damn well, prided himself on the fact even, and he knew that things were not like that. He knew what being wrong felt like, and this wasn’t it. Goddamn second guessing.

“He does look peaceful,” agreed Gem. She got up and walked quietly over. Ember was nestled into a fold of her cloak’s hood, and they chirped quietly before taking a short flight to land on Fwhip’s leg. “You’re lucky, you know?”

“Lucky?” asked Fwhip with a small scoff. “Gem, look at where we are. We’re not lucky.”

“I didn’t mean like that,” said Gem with a small sigh. She gestured at the two of them. “You’re lucky that he trusts you like this. Not that he doesn’t trust me. But even before all this happened, you two were always close.”

Fwhip was silent at that, hugging Pix a little tighter to him and getting a small squeeze in response. It was nice here, and he REALLY didn’t want to move. Gem leaned over a little to gently brush a strand of hair out of Pixl’s face, pausing a minute before flicking an unusually long lock behind Fwhip’s ear as well. The sun dipped low and disappeared, the gold that had been flowing freely from the mountain’s peaks vanishing alongside it as well, as if all it had touched had instantly soaked up the rest of it greedily.

“You could carry him to the dragons,” Gem suggested.

Fwhip just stared. “I am a beanpole,” he said, holding one thin arm out as evidence. “This is a grown-ass man. There’s no way I’ll be able to pick him up, let alone carry him, and that’s if I wanted to.”

“I keep forgetting that you’re built like a stalk of wheat,” said Gem with a small sigh. She held one hand out, flicking her fingers towards herself. “I can do it. Hand him over.”

“Won’t that wake him up?” asked Fwhip, leaning a little away from her.

“He sleeps like a fossilized log, Fwhip,” said Gem, deadpan. “Hand over the sand man. I’ll carry him to the dragons.”

With an annoyed grumble, Fwhip conceded, looking at Gem to make sure she was carrying Pix comfortably. Ember fluttered over to sit on Fwhip’s shoulder, and he sat up, taking Pixl’s bag with him.

When Pix had walked out of Pixandria, he had over one shoulder a worn duffel of dark leather, a moveable shoulder pad placed around the strap. He hadn’t opened it since, but it was reasonably heavy and Fwhip could hear the clinking of something inside. Neither he nor Gem had touched it except for to move it. It wasn’t their business nor their stuff, just like how Gem and Pixl never touched Fwhip’s knapsack.

He walked over to Odysseus and lifted his scarf for Ember to nestle gently into the folds, making sure as always that the knot over one shoulder was tight. After all this time, it still smelled like smoke, but he didn’t really care anymore. He’d burnt a couple bridges in his time. The memories sort of sucked to carry, but not as much as they used to. Fwhip figured that this was what people meant when they talked about moving on: you don’t actually move on or leave the thing behind,

you just figure out how to let it sit in your brain like a statuette in the middle of your living room.

After a while, theoried Fwhip, you stop stubbing your toe on it in the dark.

To the left of him, Pix sat behind Gem, questionably awake but still holding on as best he could. He looked over at Fwhip, who gave him a big grin and a wave like he was doing a press release, and he could hear the other man laugh even as the two dragons took off towards a nearby mountain range, towering and vast. The place where they had been previously been camped rested in the shadows of its foothills.

As they flew, Fwhip looked down at the mountains scudding by below them, deep in thought. Gem had been right when she'd said Pixl and Fwhip had always been close. Fwhip knew that he'd always looked up to Pix both as a mentor and a friend, but now...

You had always been his brother first.

He'd grown up without a sibling by his side, one hidden from him before his birth and one who left when he was younger. He didn't really resent either of them for this. Still, there was always some sort of empty space beside him, a cold hole where the warmth of shared blood should have flown. Even when he'd finally found both of them at last years down the line, he'd become used to being self-sufficient, no partner, no family, and few friends, a monolith standing alone. Fail Whip, boy count of the Grimlands, working day and night to stay afloat. Just to prove he could. And he had. There was no other way that he could have ever survived, although it left him cold at night.

Fwhip looked over at where Pix sat, giving directions that he couldn't hear at this distance. That familiar warmth behind his back that usually filled the saddle behind him was seemingly just as empty as that hole that loped besides him all those years ago.

He smiled to himself, suddenly unable to contain a huge grin that had appeared on his face. Man. Pix could never replace Sausage. Nobody could. That was a loss he would have to explore separately, silently, in a kinder world than this.

Still, a brother was a brother, whether consecrated through blood or not.

Fwhip looked over at the other two travelers sat on the dragon, smile suddenly fading. What would Gem think about this? Would she get mad? Hell, what would Pix think? Would it be weird? Would he even be okay with that?

Chewing on his lip, he almost missed the opening of the mountains into a small but well-defined valley, a grassy enclave dotted with trees and with a small lake at one end. Even in the light of a half-moon (the moon had not changed phases even minutely in a week.), the valley was startlingly green amidst the beige and grey of the mountains that surrounded it, and at the far end flickered a small bluish-white light that at this distance appeared slightly bigger than a star. Hyacinth dipped low and Fwhip followed, looking to make sure that Ember was still snug in his scarf. (They were. They were very round.)

He'd ask later. It'd be fine.

The two landed on the grass, Gem already hopping neatly off and scanning for stones as she took the bag. Fwhip watched Pix stretch, then glanced over at the portal that sat 75 or so metres away, finding as he did that he suddenly could not look away.

He got up and walked as close as he dared. The broken spire they'd found crowned atop the mountains all that time ago had been blackened and burnt, but this was a stark contrast to that:

almost an overly large door limned in light, it was slightly taller than it was wide and floating perhaps 6 inches off of the air. It was really just a rectangular outline with a thick border, but there were no ominous voids or windows to other worlds inside, just a clear view of what Fwhip assumed was the other side of the clearing. He poked his head around it as well, still keeping a wide distance from it, but it looked the same from the other side, except for that now the dragons and his siblings could be seen. Gem was building a fire, and Pix was looking up at the stars, glancing down at the portal occasionally.

After travelling so long and finding no purchase, tears fallen and muscles toned to the extreme by months of labor, it was strange to see their escape so near and so close.

Somehow, suddenly, Fwhip decided that he didn't want to leave this world. He wasn't ready yet. He couldn't. Not now.

"Fwhip!" Gem yelled from behind him. He turned to look at her. She waved a spoon in the air. "Pixl's stewing rabbit. Come on."

Fwhip ran over, all paths but this one momentarily forgotten as he almost fell over as he sat down on a nearby log as Pixl poked at the broth with a spoon. He put the lid on the pot and sat, spoon laid over both knees like he was about to hit somebody with it.

"So," said Fwhip, not actually sure what he was even planning on saying.

"So," said Gem. "Does the portal look like it'll work?"

"Yep," said Fwhip, tossing a twig into the fire for fun. "Can't see anything through it, though."

"Huh," said Gem. "Weird. Maybe we can test it by tossing a stone through or something later."

It was silent a bit longer, the three of them just staring at the fire and the pot hanging above it. Ember pecked at seeds, chirping quietly as Pix absently stroked their head with one finger. Nearby, the dragons drank from the small lake. The sky was cloudless and incredibly clear.

"So," said Pix, looking over at the portal. "We've finally made it. The end of the road. The question now is, when do we actually leave?"

"I was thinking sometime tomorrow," said Gem. "Maybe in the morning? I really don't want to stay longer than I have to."

Fwhip was silent as the other two continued talking, their discussion fading into background; Gem discussing her plans for what the three of them would do after they got out, Pixl keeping strangely silent on that front but occasionally interjecting with a quip that made her laugh. Their company was a familiar net in the midst of this star-studded void they'd all been dropped in the middle of, comfortable and gently lopsided, and it hit Fwhip suddenly that he was not prepared to leave behind the world he'd been grown on like a tomato vine across a rounded lattice.

"But I don't want to," he blurted, and the silence in the air sung loud, loud, loud in his ears.

The two stopped talking to look at him, and Pix raised an eyebrow in minute surprise but said nothing as he went to take the pot off of the fire with a messy clanging of metal and wood.

"Want to what?" asked Gem.

"Want to go," mumbled Fwhip, staring at the ground with cheeks burning. He regretted opening his dumb mouth at all.

“The portal’s right there, Fwhip,” said Gem gently but incredulously, gesturing towards it with one calloused hand. “You should have mentioned this months ago before we left.”

Fwhip sighed in deep frustration, leaning back as far as he dared on the log he was seated on to make eye contact with the stars as if they would give him an answer. Somewhere up there, Time had stopped spinning his wheel and had packed up and left: possibly on a break, possibly forever. He could feel it in the air and the way the breeze seemed to loop upon itself, circling back as soon as it hit the mountainside. And yet, this was the air he had grown up in. He had breathed none else.

“What if it’s different where we go?” he asked the stars, not looking down. “What if that world is nothing like ours? What will we do then? It’s not like we have a choice, and I know that. I’m just...” He exhaled half in anger, half in exhaustion. “Nevermind.”

“Scared?” asked Pixl, a little bit teasing but mostly genuine.

“Not scared,” said Fwhip reflexively. He paused a moment. “Okay, yeah, I’m scared. But I know you two are too, so don’t tease me about it.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” said Pix, and Fwhip heard the knocking of metal against wood and against itself as he shut his eyes, still draped over the log, which wobbled a bit as Pix sat down on it besides him.

“Fear of the unknown is natural,” said Gem airily from the other side of the fire. “And if it’s different, well, we’ve known different things before. We’ll be okay.”

“It’s also not going to be like this place will be gone forever,” added Pix. “It’ll live on through us, since all three of us will remember it. Soup?”

“Maybe in a minute,” said Fwhip. He reached his arms back, hands touching the dirt behind him, shirt exposing a bit of his stomach. “And yeah, I guess you’re right. But we’re not immortal, right? What happens if we die?”

“We’ll go to a place where they have books, and we’ll write some of our own,” said Gem confidently from the other side of the fire. “Someone else will pick them up eventually.”

“And what happens if the books burn or get wet or something and nobody can read them anymore?” asked Fwhip, rubbing his upside-down eyes with one hand. “Like, they’re going to fall apart eventually, even if someone went to all of the effort of copying them.”

“Then it will have survived against all odds, if only but for a little while,” said Pix. “I’d say that’s an achievement in itself.” He took a pause, presumably to take a sip of soup. “Also, I get the distinct feeling that that’s not going to happen.”

“How’d you know?” asked Fwhip, pushing himself back up into a sitting position more than slightly awkwardly. “Another one of your visions?”

“Nope, just a shot in the dark,” replied Pixl, looking over with a small light from the fire reflecting in his eyes. He gave Fwhip a small smile. “I’m pretty sure it’ll hit its target just fine, though.”

Fwhip sighed, swinging his legs and holding one hand out for a bowl of soup. “That’s good to know, I guess. Thanks, Pix.”

“The stars will be different there, won’t they?” asked Gem. “I just realized that.”

“They will, yes,” said Pix, taking a sip of his soup. “And if there’s anyone else there, they’ll almost certainly have studied and mapped them. Humans have been looking up into the night sky since practically the dawn of time.”

“But it won’t be here,” said Fwhip, taking a cautious sip of his soup. “Listen. I know the whole point of this journey is that we’re leaving for somewhere better, but I just can’t ignore the fact that this is where I grew up. We have known nothing else.”

“At least we’ll all be going together,” said Gem. “Right?”

“Right,” said Fwhip. He looked over at Pixl. “That includes you too, by the way,” he added. “You don’t have a choice. If you don’t want to go, then I’ll get Gem to knock you out and we’ll both drag you with us.”

“What?” asked Pix, coming to with a small start. “Oh. No, you won’t need to do that.” He laughed a little. “I was thinking about going off on my own, but then I figured that might not be the best idea considering-” he waved one hand around in the air- “everything.”

“Good,” said Gem sternly from the other end of the fire. “We’re not losing you again.”

“Yeah,” said Fwhip.

“I know,” said Pixl with a small smile. “Still, Gem, if you’re planning on leaving tomorrow...?”

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “We’re running out of time. I don’t know if we even have a week left here before this thing shuts.”

Fwhip glanced over to where the portal sat at the edge of the clearing, humming placidly. It seemed no more likely to shear apart at the seams in a silent shedding of dignity like the pine trees dropped their needles than the mountains that surrounded them did. Still, maybe it was just him, but was that a faint quarter-second flicker he caught shuddering through the frame...?

“Then that makes this our last night here, on this soil, sitting around this fire,” said Pix. “I feel like that’s important somehow.”

“It is,” said Gem, tapping a spoon against her leg thoughtfully. “I vote that we stay up late and just... talk.”

“Talk about what?” asked Fwhip.

“Anything,” shrugged Gem. “The past. If we’re going to be leaving this place, may as well give it a fitting send-off before we go.”

“But first, a drink,” said Pix, standing up and grabbing Fwhip’s cup as well as his own. “Thankfully, there’s a spring nearby.”

“Actually, I just remembered something,” said Fwhip, popping to his feet and half-sprinting over to the area where the dragons and the group’s packs were. “I think, if nobody has messed with it- yeah! I have some wine!”

“What?” asked Gem, surprise quickly changing to annoyance. “Fwhip, I said to only pack the important stuff.”

“I am a grown man, and I can do whatever I want,” announced Fwhip, taking three flasks from where they were at the bottom of the bag. “I brought four, so we should be covered for a glass each

and an extra bit if we're going for seconds."

"I mean, I'm certainly not complaining," said Pix, accepting a flask gratefully. He sighed at the half-hearted glare Gem gave him. "Gem."

"It's not that I'm against it," said Gem. "I just- is it okay if I have water instead? I've never been a heavy drinker and I don't know how strong this stuff even is and I don't want to wake up with a hangover tomorrow."

Fwhip took a quick sip of his flask, pausing a second to think. "Pretty weak," he concluded, grabbing a cup. "But yeah. I can do that."

Talk they did: late into the night, as it were, covering a myriad of subjects with a brief and calloused touch and plenty of laughter and tears to go around.

(Right here, I could interject with one of my grand sweeping cinematic shots of the landscape and those who resided within it, tack on a bit of philosophy for good measure. Weave the edges of this particular blanket closer together to be tied off soon so that those who wish to can rest underneath it and be warmed by their own body heat, reflected back by the lines of prose draped over them like a shroud.

That would be nice, but I think this time I'll go for something more down-to-earth.)

Most of the conversation centered around the past, naturally, this being a sort of elegy, but there were also discussions of plans to rest and find somewhere perhaps more quiet to settle for a while once they'd slipped the border of the land of Empires. Gem wasn't quite sure what she was going to do yet, but she was certain it'd involve some sort of magic. Fwhip was down to do whatever. Pixl kept quiet about his thoughts except for perhaps one or two comments about finding a library somewhere, but was more than happy to interject with commentary whenever the other two were discussing their plans (bickering the whole time, as they were wont to do).

"Anything, you say?" he asked, water in hand, eyes twinkling. "What about shoveling horse manure out of stables?"

"Listen, when I said 'anything,' I meant that there were some things I would want to do specifically," replied Fwhip. "Some things, well, let's say they're lower on the list."

"So what about the horse manure?"

"I mean," said Fwhip, stumbling over his words and ending on what was more of a squeak, "I wouldn't- I don't think I'd- probably not- I mean, *maybe*? I need to think about it more, okay."

"Okay, obviously that question was a bit too complicated," said Pix, quite neutrally except for the shit-eating grin on his face. Gem, who had moved to sit closer to the other two, started giggling silently. "What about on a scale of one to ten? On that scale, where would you put shoveling manure?"

"I'd rate it a 'none of your business,'" said Fwhip primly. Gem started giggling louder, and Pix ducked his head down to hide his smile behind one fist as Fwhip continued, increasing in both (playful) anger and volume as he went on. "Hey! Listen, okay! I think that a man has a right to actually *think about some stuff in peace and quiet* sometimes when he's not being hounded by the world's most annoying siblings."

"But poking at you is fun," said Gem. To underline her point, she poked Fwhip in the arm, who

leaned away.

“You’re both horrible,” he said. “I take back every single nice thing I’ve ever said about you, Gem. It’s all been redacted.”

“You do that about once per week anyways,” said Gem with a small smile. “I think I’ll be fine.”

“Now, Pix gets a pass,” started Fwhip, looking over at him and noticing the strange look he was giving him, “because- what?”

(That “what” was said inquisitively and genuinely with a rising tone at the end, by the way.)

“You said siblings, plural.”

“Oh,” said Fwhip. “Uh.”

“Oh, you don’t need to explain anything,” said Pix with a shrug and a small smile. “I just thought I’d point it out.”

Fwhip turned back to Gem, who nodded once as she took another sip of water.

(You get the idea.)

There was a lot of banter in that vein, and a couple of stupid puns, and for perhaps three hours they sat there, just reminiscing and laughing and raising their flasks and glasses in one final toast to this, the cradle that bore them all. This, the world that taught them love and pain and a thousand other things besides.

Eventually, the conversation tapered off after Gem and Fwhip had finished telling Pixl everything they could remember about Sausage, and Gem walked over to Hyacinth to fall asleep with her back to her one last time. (The three had already figured out that there was no way the dragons would fit through the portal. This had been a sore blow to their hearts, but what else could they do?) Fwhip offered to clean up. Pixl wandered out to the edge of the little valley where the horizon was visible and stood there, looking at the moon.

The realization that this really was their last night here had hit all three of them at different times during the night and sunk its teeth in deep. Different people say goodbye to things in different ways, all deeply intimate and personal.

For Gem, she spent her time giving Hyacinth a good cleaning with the scale brush, each rasp of the bristles over hardened ink-black keratin a slow and practiced noise. She whispered to her steed as she went, explaining that for reasons that were out of her hands that Hyacinth could not go with them, explaining for reasons that the both of them knew incredibly well that she was infinitely sorry. The leaving would be nothing personal. The goodbye, though, definitely was.

Fwhip was mostly silent as he went about packing things into the bags, deep in thought. To his mind came a thousand different ways of leaving some sort of mark, some sort of action, leaving behind something that would signify silently to this world that he had been here, a final addendum to the eulogy that his sister had begun humming into the dark all of those months ago. Each one left as soon as it came. What could he bear to part with? His tools he could use and would need, and he could not carry Odysseus’ saddle the thousand miles to a foreign land, for he had made it himself years ago, and it would fit upon the back of no other. He could write something, but he could come up with no words that stretched wide enough to encompass the grave of the only place he had ever known.

Instead, he settled for forcing himself to take patience in this one task, attending to it as a saint would a holy statue. Fwhip was not a religious man. He followed no god or gods of man. He followed the rules of logic and no else. This is how he came to the eventual conclusion that if he was going to really commemorate this place, the only way he could do that would be to get out alive and make sure that wherever he went, he recorded what he could remember.

Pixl had attended many funerals in his time.

He had walked the silent lattice of streets at daybreak, knocked on doors hinged on houses silent and solemn as a ghost. Knelt beside deathbeds to send them off quietly, a sacred action, a practiced action. He had witnessed many types of deaths. Once, he had experienced a certain type of death firsthand and came back as fresh as a wound. He was still figuring it out, this strange open rawness, the way the wind made sure it was felt as it gritted gently against his skin. It was strange, to live again, and he decided that this time he was going to walk into its arms with an open mind and open heart. He had forgotten how it truly was to *be* in his eagerness to diminish himself, once. He would not make that mistake again.

But how does one properly mourn a whole world? A universe, even?

Well, he was taught, it goes in steps. First you honor the soul by putting it to rest. Then you take the body and with it you follow any instructions those who knew it best left behind. You support those who are left behind and let them grieve at their own pace. The rest usually follows.

The soul of a world is ephemeral and lives in a thousand different pinpoints, if it even has a soul at all. To go over the body would take him thirty trillion lifetimes. That left those who remained to grieve, and he was one of the only ones left, so he did what he could do and murmured prayers into the night sky, prayers of safekeeping and a safe journey to the afterlife. Would there even be an afterlife for this place? Did worlds have graveyards they all went to when those who could remember it passed on, the land of everything ever forgotten? If they could, then he hoped this place would get there safely. If nobody else cared, then he would.

Ember sat on right shoulder. The stars were bright tonight.

From behind: footsteps. Fwhip's. Over the months, he'd discovered he could distinguish between his and Gem's.

"A penny for your thoughts?" Fwhip asked, coming up on his left side to look up at the sky with him.

"I'm in the mood for poetics tonight, if you'll allow that," said Pix. "There are a couple things on my mind."

"Go ahead," said Fwhip. "I'm listening."

Pix sat on the grass and Fwhip followed. "I've been looking at the stars for a long, long time," he said. "Actually, for as long as I can remember. I've been studying them for almost as long. There's a whole lot of research out there about how everything in those celestial spheres fit together and why they move the way they do."

"Mhm."

"I've started taking mental notes of a different sort on my own, though, over the past decade or so," said Pix, leaning back and putting his arms behind his head. "About what looking up at the night sky does to a person, and the sort of thoughts and emotions it inspires."

"It's really pretty," said Fwhip, lying down as well. He let out a small laugh. "Sorry. This is your conversation. I bet whatever you have to say is way more eloquent than whatever I have going on."

"Well, that's the thing," said Pix. "See, if you lie down on the ground on a cloudy night and look up for long enough, a strange thing starts to happen. You forget all of your tiredness. You forget all of your pain. You are flat on your back, tied to this earth, and the clouds are so low that you feel like if you just had the confidence to reach up and touch them, you could. But that's the thing. You dare not move, lest you break the immersion."

"The split between the ground and the sky is a thing that has been well documented in many words by many people who will forever be so much more gifted in their works and words than I. I, with my shattered visage and quiet voice and my concise little poems, will never boom like they did. Like they continue to do. But see, the thing is: if I don't try, it will kill me.

"Let's start from the beginning here. Ever since humans have figured out how to speak, to underline truths in red chalk on cave walls, there has always been a split between sky and earth. It can't be bridged. Somewhere, there will always be a further point that cannot be achieved at that moment: even if you got to the moon, the stars would still be so, so small. You couldn't just reach out and grab one. And maybe that's how it's designed to be, because touching one would kill you. You see how the Sun is? She gives warmth, but too much burns your skin right off. That's well documented too. Take a look at Icarus, for example.

"Too much of a good thing, I have learned, is just as deadly a poison as too much of a bad thing.

"I slowly drove myself insane over those few years wandering the wasteland, trying to burn away my very soul until I was purged of enough of my futile and infinite sins to be worthy enough to finally touch a star. I was obsessed with reaching forever towards what I could never reach.

"Those clouds? They never rained. It's dry in the desert for a reason. You have to make your own rain, find your own moisture. You have to make do with the sun on the dewdrops in the morning. You have to coax the water out of cactuses. You have to survive.

"And now we're back here at square one- no, not even that. Square zero. Square one is where you start, but this feels like finding a truth that you were living the whole time. This was here before I was born, and it'll be here after I leave this place and die.

"I often wish that I know what it could be like to be a star, far above everything and everything. No worries. No burdens. But you know what? I'm sorry for the stars. They'll never know what it's like to be human. They'll never know what it was like to live, or cry, or be hungry, or lose sleep over a poem. They'll never know. And for that, I'm sorry for them.

"Do you ever suppose that, were the roles reversed, and maybe they are somewhere, that the stars wish they were human sometimes?"

Fwhip was silent for a long moment. Above, pale slits of cloud moved towards the moon. "I mean," he started slowly. "I don't know. You're kind of asking the wrong guy here. But I guess that if we could prove the stars could think, I think so, yeah. That's an interesting sentiment to have. You'd really wish that for them, if they had the chance? Despite everything?"

"Oh, yes," Pixl answered. "Despite everything. In spite of everything, actually. The highest honor I can bestow upon a thing, I've decided, is wishing upon it a soul with my entire being. So yes, I hope the stars get to feel something someday. I think it'd be nice for them."

“Damn,” said Fwhip after another pause. “Well, it sounds like you got things figured out at least?”

“Yeah,” said Pix.

“Nice.”

The two just lay there for a little, neither really saying anything, just looking up and up and eternally up. It was a little awkward, but maybe that was just on Fwhip’s end.

“I don’t know how to respond to that, but I just wanted to let you know that I’m gonna go back to camp now and make sure Odysseus is all cleaned up before we go,” he said eventually, sitting up and stretching. “Seriously though, that was beautiful, dude.”

“Thank you,” said Pix, sitting up as well. “I’ll probably be here for a few more minutes before headed off to bed myself. Goodnight.”

“Night!” said Fwhip, standing up. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow.”

Fwhip wandered off to give one last goodbye to Odysseus. Pix remained where he was sitting, but soon rose to join the other two in sleep. For the first time in years that he could recall, he had no dreams nor nightmares to serenade him as he rested.

Chapter End Notes

Many the peoples many the oceans I crossed --

I arrive at these poor, brother, burials
so I could give you the last gift owed to death

and talk (why?) with mute ash.

Now that Fortune tore you from me, you
oh poor (wrongly) brother (wrongly) taken from me,

now still anyway this -- what a distant mood of parents

handed down as the sad gift for burials --

accept! Soaked with tears of a brother
and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell.

Catullus, poem 101, transl. Anne Carson

a couple people in the comments have noted that empires s2 canonically takes place in the same world as empires s1, and i uh. completely forgot about that while writing the last chapter where the narrator said that this world would be dead after these three left it. for the purposes of this story, the narrator's knowledge only extends to the events inside of the story and they are blind to things outside of it, so they are prone to

inaccuracies sometimes. they are also prone to consistencies like i the author am which should also cover the inconsistencies in names, minor details between the start of the story and the later chapters, and the whole debacle with the timeline. think of it like a mostly reliable narrator but they make mistakes sometimes

that monologue that pixl gives near the end with all the paragraph breaks has been written since october of 2022, by the way! i basically copy pasted it into the chapter itself it required very very little editing i have been sitting on it for months

anyways yeah the next chapter is basically the "last" before the epilogue and then thats the fic! it is 10pm and i wrote like 3k words in three hours and i sure hope i didnt skip over any glaring errors while editing this. i'm going to bed now goodnight ily all

and the weight finally falls from Atlas' shoulders.

Chapter Summary

All stories must end somewhere. This one happens to end with a beginning.

Or,

They get out.

Chapter Notes

i uh. Don't have anything witty or funny to say here honestly! i'll save the tearful thanks for the epilogue notes but it feels fucking surreal to finally be here at the end of this after almost nine months. if you've been here since the beginning or showed up late but have stuck around ever since, i just wanted to say thanks. here goes nothing hope i don't fuck this up o7

The sun is shining
and the birds are singing
and because today is the very last day
they will sing forever.
- [A Softer World](#) 1243

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They woke at dawn to the most beautiful sunrise they had ever seen.

Across the small grassy field dotted with clovers and desert shrub, the sun's rays cast a portrait of gold and copper orange through the air, catching the idly drifting fog that loped above the ground in whorls of ash rose and saturated grey. The air was sweet and oddly cool.

It was almost as if a god had dipped his paintbrush into a can of fresh sunlight and painted it across the world's freckled face; golden and glowing in the minutiae of every stitch and sideways seam that made up the edges of leaves and sticks and rocks.

It was beautiful.

Gem was the first awake and the first to lie her eyes upon this hallowed scene, and she elbowed her brothers awake instantly without taking her eyes from it. Fwhip rose grumpily, rubbing his eyes. Pix opened one eye blearily and then the other almost instantly, shooting up as fast as someone who had just woken up physically could with a small wince. (He'd slept weird on his back. Don't worry, it worked itself out within a few seconds.)

(That final night, they'd all slept in a little line, pile, whatever you want to call it by silent

agreement, Gem in the middle and the other two at the ends. It had been warm there, and quite pleasant.)

"Holy crap," said Fwhip. "That's pretty."

"Yeah," said Gem.

"I wonder what it would look like if one of us walked out into it," mused Pix, shaking his head a little to wake himself up quicker. "D'you think it'd ruin it?"

"I don't think so," said Gem, standing up and dusting her skirt off, walking over without even bothering to lace up her boots or put on her cloak first. Clad in purple and frizzy red, she stepped into the sunbeams, casting a heavy shadow into the mist behind her and raising one hand up to shield her eyes from the sun. She looked down at her arm, moving it this way and that, trying on the way the light fell on it, and then she turned to give the boys a grin that was so wide and radiant one could almost think that the light came from her and her alone.

"Did it work?" she asked.

"Yep," called back Pix, sitting up a little straighter and smiling himself. "You're veritably glowing, Gem."

"Literally," added Fwhip, scrambling to his feet himself and offering a hand to help Pix up. He ran over, whooping a little when he finally got out of the shadow of the mountain, and as Pix walked over (much more slowly, for his knees still ached) he paused and smiled softly for the caramel-gold light that draped over the two of them, walking around and poking at each other.

"Come on," said Fwhip, beckoning him over. "This won't last for long."

Pix walked over and cautiously stepped in, immediately squinting at how incredibly *bright* everything was. He took a strand of his hair and looked at it- in that golden dawn, it seemed the color of caramel instead of the usual dark brown that it held.

"Pretty, right?" asked Fwhip with a grin. His hair looked like it was on fire, as did Gem's.

"Very," said Pix.

When the mist had faded and the deep gold tinting the air had settled into a more familiar warm white, they ate (slowly), every bite careful and solemn. Whether they were stalling for time or just saying this final goodbye, none of them asked, for they did not want to know the answer.

Morning on the dawn of the eclipse and the escape, and the last three acolytes of the fallen societies that now lay a universe away in the southeast sat eating silently around a small fire.

(You may note that this section is strangely absent of poetics. That is because really, there is nothing more of that sort to be said that hasn't already been mentioned already.)

(You know the story. You know their history. We have followed their footsteps over months and countless leagues.)

(You know what happens now. This has been alluded to since the beginning of the story. See, it even says right there at the top: they get out. And they do. And they did.)

(Dearest reader, they *survived*. Isn't that extraordinary?)

(All that is left now are last few moments, presented as facts in bullet points:)

- They spoke no word while packing and, indeed, were almost completely silent up until the very second that they left.
- The saddles were taken off of the dragons so that they might wander around freely.
- The dragons did not go with them, since they could not fit. The bird did, however. Fwhip was not happy about this, but what else could they do?
- I do not know what the dragons thought about this.
- Each took their own: Fwhip his bag of tools, Pix his worn leather knapsack, Gem her spellbook.
- Every single one of them paused and stared behind them as they approached, chests tightening with the desperation of a final goodbye but with nothing left to say. There was nothing left to say, except for perhaps:

“Goodbye,” Fwhip said out loud to the silent air.

There was no response, except for a sudden gust of wind that sounded much like a sigh.

- They stepped through, and the door shut behind them.

And now we are at the end and I have found, strangely enough, that even after thousands of words, I cannot find the proper ones to formulate an end.

Do not worry about me, for I will remain here, and I am quite content to stay inside a story. I will appear again at the beginning when needed, to take you through the motions again and again until you have them memorized (if that is the course of action you wish to take), and then again. It is not such a bad thing to live within a closed loop, unless you're human of course, and then I guess that might get quite repetitive. But I digress.

I leave you with this quote from an author you might recognize:

But for this tired historian, it might be best to leave the past behind and turn towards the future.
For those who have sown the seeds can only hope
for a bountiful harvest.

Chapter End Notes

this is the "end" of the fic, but fear not, there'll be an epilogue coming as soon as i can manage it! :] trust me, these three will meet again, whether that be in this world or the next.

and yes that final paragraph is from pixl's esmp s2 finale video. i wrote all of this in the car. i am out of thank yous just know that i owe yall the world

[epilogue.]

Chapter Summary

Our stories do not begin here, and neither do they end.

or,

a bit of an extra scene: i did tell you that they'd meet again, did i not?

Chapter Notes

HERE is the last chapter. since i write basically all of my chapter notes and descriptions and stuff before i actually post the fic itself, i'm gonna write the actual epilogue after but i just know that i'm going to finally be able to sleep well at night after getting this all done and dusted. I also have the second masterdoc to work on as well, of course, but if all goes well that should be linked in the ending notes of this chapter.

If you have gotten this far, I would like to thank you profusely and profoundly. It's been a hell of a journey through this thing, and I could not have done it without the constant comforting stream of comments here on ao3 and asks on Tumblr. I am writing this for myself first, my friends in the group chat second, and last but definitely not least all of you guys.

Let's finish what we started here and finally put this story to rest.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He had wandered far, far, straying out of the hard set bounds of stories and their eons. Over the years, he had accumulated a sort of strange solemn peace around him: the wrestles in the deeps of the night with his soul where he had tossed and turned in bed, caught betwixt the covers, sweating and out of breath had rendered him worn dangerously thin.

Strangely, though, he found that as time went on, the death grip that herculean fear had on his brain grew lesser and lesser, and eventually came an evening where he wiggled free from its grasp and simply looked over his shoulder at it, stronger for the healing.

It had gotten easier since then, and for that he was deeply grateful.

He found over time, walking the worlds, that he'd found a new appreciation for the mundanities of life, the way the seasons churned and rumbled over biomes and small sleepy towns nestled between the shoulders of mountains. Time was as gentle as it was brutally honest, but he could do with a little more honesty.

When they'd gotten out, they'd walked into the edge of a twilit forest with a small village lit with cheerful yellow lamps within walking distance and the sight was enough to freeze them where they

stood. Would its inhabitants be friendly? Would they understand them at all? Would they take the scant currency they offered?

As it turned out, that little village had an inn, and its owner and tender had taken one look at their wrecked and sorry state and given them all free board for the night with the one condition that they wash the embedded grime and soot off of them lest they stink up the whole place overnight.

And so they found that the world was still kind.

They'd settled down shortly after that, a little house on the edge of another small village with a shower and a kitchen and enough room for the three of them to each sleep separately. It was not perfect, but as they each slowly eased into this gentler life, they found that it was enough. Gods, it was enough. The walls were often splashed with laughter and banter, and the lights were rarely off.

He found as time passed that his heart was more given to archiving and studies, as it had been before he had left. He plunged into libraries with a pen and notepad, taking scribbled notes as he went, and when the archives of this world had been thoroughly exhausted underneath his careful scrutiny he turned at last to fresh horizons, as he knew he would eventually. He promised with both hands and a hug that he would find them again.

Thus he became a wanderer once more, but with a marked difference to previous paths he had taken: he was not truly alone, for now in the guise of a wandering scholar he found he found friends and conversations easily, especially since he tried his best to respect all he met.

He did not know what they had seen nor borne upon their myriad shoulders, just as they did not know of his.

It was a warm morning in the plains in an uninhabited world, a type that he stumbled upon quite frequently. He had discovered evidence of previous civilization underneath a layer of dirt in the savannahs, and although there was little evidence to go off of, he was certain there was more.

And besides, the longer he spent here, the more strangely familiar this place felt.

He was traipsing in the shade of some oak trees on the edge of a small forest, for the day had grown quite warm, when he smelled smoke and heard very faintly: voices. Loud and cheerful, with a cadence he remembered.

He smiled, sudden and huge, and walked out into the light of day with his arms spread.

"Hello," he said. "Long time no see, eh?"

Chapter End Notes

80k+ words, nine months, and several seasons later, we are now here. holy fuck. i did it.

i wrote two masterdocs going into the behind the scenes and the sort of ideas behind this whole thing. the first one is incredibly unorganized but i still love it so i kept it and the second is arranged in chronological order and also has a works cited at the end because I'm insane like that.

[masterdoc 1 link](#)
[masterdoc 2 link](#)
[ashes website link- more cool stuff here!](#)

End Notes

Although this work lists me as the sole author, which is technically correct, there is no way I could have completed this fic alone. Thus, I owe this whole work to these people:

andreaissy, a member of the Ashes groupchat on Discord and long-time friend of mine who has been an invaluable resource for brainstorming, moral support, and poetry.

whimsicaltwine, the other member of the Ashes groupchat, whose headcanon forms the entire basis for this fic. Most of the plot and a ton of the details in here were originally her ideas, which she graciously let me turn into a full fic. Her WRA knowledge and plethora of headcanons about Gem, fWhip, and Sausage's characters have been invaluable for helping me work out some of the character backstories in this work, especially since I haven't actually watched any of the WRA's episodes for Empires Season One.

You can find both of them under the usernames mentioned on Tumblr and ao3.

I'd also like to give an honorable mention to my cat Artemis, who has been by my side while I wrote this fic for almost a full half of the work. He is very small and very soft and I love her a lot.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!